

play



Hands all over
Shadow

Sega's other
Hedgehog takes
center stage



Reviewed
Ninja Gaiden Black

3-page review including
exclusive Team Ninja
concept art!

Condemned Criminal Origins

the Xbox 360 launch title to die for

October 2005

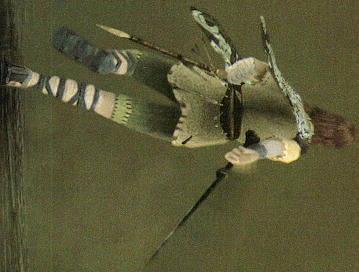
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10 >

play japan
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search of the power to save your one true love.

Yet now you find yourself here, standing in the shadow of a beast who will devastate the tiny, insignificant beings who dared to disturb his slumber.

Unless you arm yourself with the one weapon large enough to slay him. One he cannot see. Nor can you.

Yet you must employ it with every move you have the courage to make.

And should you not prepare? You must here, for here, that cannot be scaled, but must be slain.

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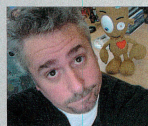
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NEED FOR SPEED
MOST WANTED





Letter from the Editor

46

Changing the Play

Aside from this being our first Xbox 360 cover, the big news this issue is the arrival of Play Japan. It's been the most requested addition to the magazine from pretty much day one, but we didn't want to introduce it until we knew we could deliver something significant, working through proper channels to offer compelling stories and content year-round, which means securing a Tokyo address and, more importantly, finding an accomplished gaming journalist fluent in both Japanese language and etiquette to head it up... no easy task, let me tell you. When our good friend Nick Des Barres (a.k.a. Nick Rox) tracked us down, we knew we had our man. He started with me back when I was in the import game mail-order business (Die-Hard Game Club anyone?) and went on to become instrumental in the success of GameFan. Nick, together with the multi-talented Dai Kohama, is now set to deliver Japan coverage as you've never seen it. You can read both of their bios in the section opener on your way to Akihabara... After 14 years of video game magazine publishing, I have to say their first feature is among the best I've ever seen, anywhere. In the month's ahead we'll be adding previews, reviews, interviews, and more exclusive features to Play Japan as well as a dedicated area on our website (which is undergoing a much-needed transformation.) We're super excited to have Nick and Dai Kohama on board and the timing couldn't be better, with the big 360 push in Japan well underway and the PS3 and Revolution close behind. Next stop: TGS.

In other Play news... We bid a fond farewell to our Senior Editor Chris Hoffman, who after much deliberation has decided to take a position with

our friends over at Nintendo Power. Power's a great magazine and Chris' love for all things Nintendo will surely make it even better. We wish him all the best and look forward to interrogating him monthly for inside information. He will be sorely missed, both for his talent and his propensity for wearing wrestling masks, but fear not, as the lovely and talented Ashley Esqueda will be assuming senior editor duties and will surely bring her own special flair to the position. This month also marks the first official issue for our new San Francisco correspondent Greg Orlando. Greg's a gifted writer as well as a great personality, so we're super excited to have him aboard. I think you'll find his perspective and style add a new dimension to Play, filling those areas (console gaming online, simulations, strategy RPGs...) we tend to graze over.

And finally, no matter how out of place, I would be remiss not to mention the tragedy brought on by hurricane Katrina. While we sit here concerned about the price of Xbox 360 bundle packs people are fighting for their lives, battling not only the aftermath, but the subsequent insanity. Our hearts go out to them and everyone reaching out to help them.

And with that, please have at what I think may be our best yet, and I'm a tough critic.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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TY THAT WAS THE WEST



DIVERSE ACTION PACKED MISSIONS



COMBAT ON HORSEBACK



PlayStation 2



XBOX 360



PC
CD-ROM
SOFTWARE

NEVERSOFT

ACTIVISION

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One reader is torn on Nintendo, another gives Hillary a piece of his mind

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Condemned: Criminal Origins

Serial killers are on the loose, and it's up to you to use your forensic skills... and intrinsic senses... to track them through this powerfully dark world of death.

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Before the game becomes a reality, someone has to come up with the art that defines the worlds. It's called concept art, and it's a beautiful thing...

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The Back of the Book

Summing it all up in one word: gameplay. Well, actually, it's not that simple...



YOU CAN'T PLAY DUNGEONS & DRAGONS WITHOUT
LEARNING A LITTLE SOMETHING
ABOUT COURAGE.



GET TOGETHER. ROLL SOME DICE. HAVE FUN.



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LETTER OF THE MONTH

Dear Hillary

I share your anguish at Hillary's comments but I'm not surprised by them. Since I have more gray hair than you (as good as excuse as any), let me explain how I think this all came to be.

Our country was founded by Pilgrims after they left Holland and got backing from the Virginia Company in England for the voyage over here. According to them, they left Europe because of the teaching of their Puritan brand of religion. The real reason was probably the Europeans kicked them out because they were a bunch of whacked-out nut-cases. You may think this judgment is overly severe, but I think most professionals today would agree that the Puritan religion, a religion that preaches that pain and suffering are good and pleasure is bad, is both dangerous and psychologically harmful. The Puritans thought that pleasure is something you enjoy in heaven, not on Earth. And boy, were they ever true to their religion. Remember, these were the wonderful people that slaughtered almost all the people of the nations of North America and put people to death for having sex before marriage.

One might ask why echoes of such terrible ideas still live in American society today. Well, it might have something to do with the fact that the church has access to our children before they reach the age of critical thinking. It might have something to do with the fact that religion is used as a political tool in this country while maintaining a non-political status.

Thomas Jefferson wrote about the dangers of mixing religion and politics, and as he so eloquently put it:

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state."

Therefore, one might argue that Hillary's political comments advocating repression of sex in video games, which are based on religion-derived puritan ethics, are not in the spirit of the American Constitution as

envisioned by our founding fathers, since they effectively dissolve the separation between church and state given that she is a candidate for the President of the United States.

Cheers,
Henry

We only regret that you weren't here to receive your standing ovation...

Games rule

After reading up on information that has leaked out about the next-generation systems, I can't help but get that feeling of almost pity for Nintendo. I felt this way when they launched the Nintendo 64 and the GameCube. They seem to keep refusing to tag along with the current trend.

"...Nintendo has done little more than stick to their guns of making quality games."

With the Nintendo 64, they stuck with a cartridge format. On the GameCube, it did little more than just play games. All the other guys wanted to break the innovation bar with their systems, and Nintendo has done little more than stick to their guns of making quality games.

It is not to say that they haven't come through with some truly breakthrough technology for their hardware, ie, the Game Boy Player adapter for the GameCube or the DS. But thinking on it, all their hardware is mainly related to the direct improvement of their software. When they added analog control with the pack-in controller for the Nintendo 64, it was so that we could enjoy 3D games more without cramping our thumbs. The touch screen on the DS is not just a gimmick, but it does make for a unique gameplay experience (although the idea is still a little undeveloped).

Sony and Microsoft are making the PS3 and Xbox 360 seem like PC systems with many online options and their support of a hard drive. High Definition on these systems will make the games look crystal-clear as well. But is that really going to enhance the playing experience for the software? I am all for HD and customized soundtracks, but I do hope that is not where the developers'

creative process are going to get lost in. The Revolution, as recently announced, will not have HD support, and the online strategy still seems a little weak. Aside from a supposed groundbreaking controller, Nintendo's new machine seems to be just upgrading the specs of the GameCube.

I consider myself to be a more single-player gamer. I like multiplayer games like Mario Kart and Winning Eleven 8 soccer, but as I haven't jumped on the online bandwagon, the fact that Sony and Microsoft's new machines are to be PC friendly is a little intimidating for me. Just as I and my video game playing habits are becoming of the minority, so do I feel for Nintendo's plan of being a strictly gamers' company. They've held on, obviously, saleswise. I just hope their dedication doesn't ruin them in the end with all the technological advancement

going on around us. I guess I just want to keep gaming in the coming years and I hope the reasons I picked up the controller don't fade out. Maybe Nintendo can keep pioneering their dedication in the future and hopefully with good success to the masses.

Raul A.

With gamers' games fast becoming an endangered species, I think it's safe to assume that Nintendo's strategy is not only sound, but in the long run best for the millions of core gamers who are in this for life. Duplicating Sony and Microsoft would be to give in to the rabbits they still have yet to capture...and even when they do, will their core games match Nintendo's?

Die hard game fan

The reason I am writing is in regards to your editorial intro of this month's play, which had me laugh, smile and think. I am a 28-year-old guy, PhD thank you very much, and currently working on financing of feature films. I sound very "polo shirt" and the rest (he he), although there is a catch.

I LOVE VIDEO GAMES! Since I was 4,

I had a spectrum ZX48k, which was so inferior to the NES, but I loved it. I [have been] playing games ever since, on *all* the systems out there, including (yes) a *real* Neo Geo system, which I had to work a whole summer to get! I am a friggin' fanatic, crazy to the bone, and quite knowledgeable on video games. Heck, I used to have *every* issue of GameFan magazine back in the glory days.

Anyway... back to your letter. I Agree! People who do not play video games are *missing* some serious *fun*! What in the friggin' blue hell is wrong with these guys? Sure, I have a beautiful girlfriend and I drive a 2005 911 Cab4. Does it make me "stupid" or crazy playing games as much?!? I do not think so! I think that every man or woman who does *not* play video games owe it to themselves to give them a try.

Video games are a great escape from a bland reality, a way to stimulate your mind and relax your soul in colorful, distant worlds that the talented minds of the creators have conceived.

Yes! We need a friggin' SAG, we need *proper* awards (G-Phoria what?!?) and we need a friggin' Oscar for David Jaffe! Kojima! Schafer! God damn it! People wake up! Video games are the *films of the future*! Let's give 'em some credit!!!!

And yes Dave. Plug that guitar in, cause the most crazy thing happened. My mom, 53 years old, used to turn off the power sometimes if I was playing too long, now...is a friggin' *Nintendo nut*, getting 100 percent on Crash, Mario, Wario and Samus. Can you friggin' believe that? After 30 years of saying no, now she is playing four hours a day!!!! Now I believe. Now I know that all of our childhoods playing Zelda, Contra, Golden Axe, Afterburner, Final Fight, Streets of Rage, TMNT, Gunstar Heroes, Sonic, Mario, Wonderboy, Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Axel, Thunder Force 4, Fatal Fury and KOF will *not* go to waste and a wider public will be able to appreciate them as pieces of art they are *and* have fun with them...

When on the 405S, I'm thinking of PS3 instead of a stupid sitcom, and thank God my brain isn't as jelly as all those people who need to wake up and stop perceiving video games as the destruction of our youth.

Elias G

Like Mucha Lucha; it's a way of life!!

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- GAME SPOT

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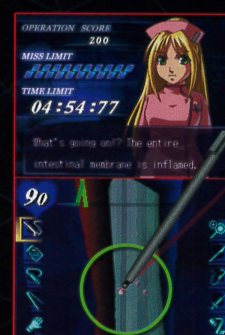
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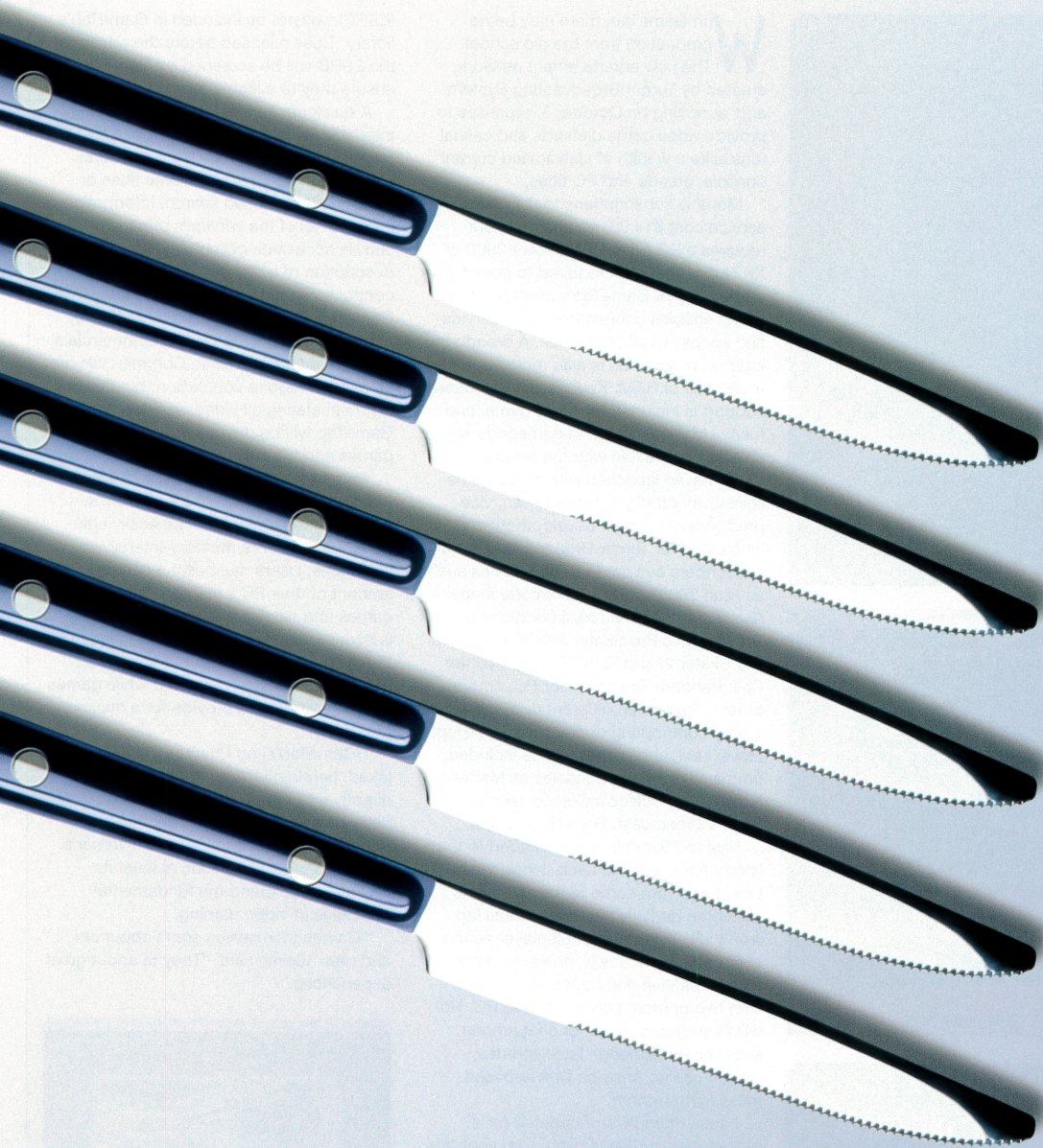


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& WHITE
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Crude Humor
Use of Alcohol
Violence

TAP ACROSS AMERICA

Turner Broadcasting offers new games network



A stellar selection...



"Games themselves aren't about old and new. They're about great experiences."

Blake Lewin, vp of product development, Turner Broadcasting

With GameTap, there may be no graduation from the old school. The new entertainment network, created by Turner Broadcasting System and launching on October 3, promises to provide video game diehards and casual fans alike a wealth of classic and current console, arcade and PC titles.

Monthly subscriptions to the GameTap service cost \$14.95, and the network requires a PC running Windows 2000 or XP. Subscribers are required to download a free copy of GameTap's client software, which enables connection to the service and access to all the games. A broadband Internet connection is also required, as is 256 MB of RAM. Keyboard and mouse support is included for every game, and many USB joysticks and gamepads will also be compatible with the service.

GameTap launches with a 300-game library, according to Blake Lewin, vice president of product development and innovation for Turner Broadcasting. Launch subscribers can tap in to game titles such as Atari 2600's Pitfall, the arcade megahit Asteroids, the Dreamcast iterations of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater and Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2, and Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow for PC, among others. Seventeen different publishers will be contributing content for GameTap, Lewin said, and games will be included from such far-flung consoles as Mattel's Intellivision, Coleco's Colecovision and Sega's Dreamcast, Genesis and 32X.

Five to 10 games will be added to the library each week to keep things fresh, Lewin said, but some of the selections will come partially neutered; GameTap won't initially support multiplayer action over its network. It will, however, allow for competitive and cooperative action with two or more players on one PC. Nor will GameTap provide for chat among subscribers, although later updates will include an America Online-based messaging system.

Family-friendly and targeted for a mainstream audience, GameTap supports multiple screen names on one account, and has parental controls to ensure children aren't playing any unwanted titles. To further the system's mass appeal, games receiving an "M" rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board

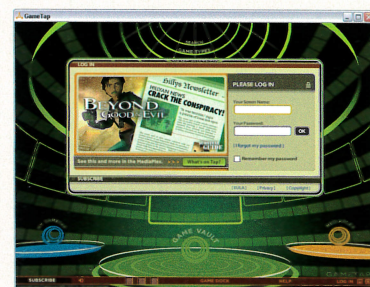
(ESRB), will not be included in GameTap's library. Titles released before the advent of the ESRB will be screened by GameTap to ensure they're suitable for all ages.

A quick stroll through GameTap's interface reveals a clean, ring-based organizational scheme. Users can scan various genres for their favorite titles or perform a text-based search. Information cards for all of the service's offerings can be accessed, giving players a brief description of every game as well as a control scheme to play it. In addition, GameTap also offers bonus materials for many games such as classic commercials and promotional artwork. Commercials are almost a foregone conclusion, but Lewin is firm in stating all videos included on GameTap will be directly applicable to the games and the service.

Games are downloaded onto a player's PC, and Lewin promised the system's streaming technology will be easily able to handle the more memory-intensive selections. Users must allot a certain amount of their PC's memory for stored games and saves, and any downloading is accompanied by promotional videos for the system's content. As many as three downloads can be completed while games are being played to provide for a minimum of hassle.

"[GameTap's] no Phantom," Lewin joked, heralding the system's launch and directly referring to Infinium Labs' oft-delayed and seldom-seen game console. Although it remains to be seen if Turner's GameTap will sink or soar, at least its creators understand the fundamental principles of video gaming.

"Games themselves aren't about old and new," Lewin said. "They're about great experiences."



411 ON 360 PRICING

Two different versions available at launch. Weird.

Much like the system's logo, rumors about the Xbox 360's price have swirled wildly over the past few months—and pretty much all of them have turned out to be true. Yes, it will be under \$300. Yes, it will be more than \$300. Most importantly, yes, there will be different versions available at different price points. Microsoft officials had indicated that the 360 would clock in near the \$299.99 price point, and indeed it will—but only for the Core System, which includes only the essentials: the console, a wired (yes, wired) controller, AV cables, a removable faceplate and a membership to the Live service. To get all of the 360's promised features right out of the box, such as cord-free play and high-definition visuals, you'll have to drop \$399.99 for the standard system, which adds in a 20 GB hard drive, wireless Live headset, an Ethernet cable and a media remote control (for a limited time only), while high-definition AV cables will replace the standard ones and a wireless controller will be included in lieu of the wired version. And, of course, features like backward compatibility will only be available with the hard drive. Naturally, all the peripherals and more will be available separately, including the hard drive for \$99.99, a 64 MB memory unit for \$39.99, a wireless networking adaptor for \$99.99 and a variety of high-end cables. While it's arguable whether or not the stripped-down Core System is anything more than a marketing ploy, one thing is for sure: getting a fully featured Xbox 360 will definitely cost a little more than anticipated. We can only hope it'll be worth the dough.



360 accessories price list

Faceplate	\$19.99
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Wireless Network Adapter	\$99.99
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Missing Link

New Zelda delayed until 2006

A wise man once said, "delays are temporary, mediocrity is forever," but that will probably do little to console the millions of Zelda fans who won't be getting the long-awaited Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess this holiday season as originally planned. As if the delay itself wasn't enough of a Master Sword-thrust to the heart, Nintendo has no new release date for the game—they've only announced that it will be released sometime in their next fiscal year occurring after March 31, 2006, meaning spring at the earliest, possibly later. Couldn't Nintendo at least have offered some sort of playable demo as a consolation prize? Of course, the extra time will almost assuredly be used to make Twilight Princess even more spectacular than it's appeared to be so far, but with the biggest weapon in their arsenal out of action, Nintendo will likely be in store for one rough holiday season.

ALL SYSTEMS GO FOR MICRO

The smallest Game Boy is ready for retail

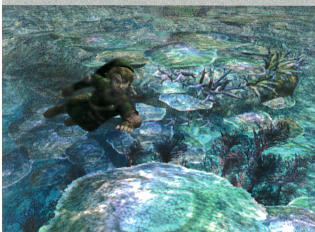
Nintendo's super-small, super-cool Game Boy Micro was one of the surprise highlights of this year's E3, and now it's ready to leap off of store shelves and subtly into pockets (around necks...onto belt buckles...) of gamers everywhere. The aptly named 2" x 4" system has been given an official U.S. release date of September 19—meaning it'll probably be in stores by the time you read this—with a price of \$99.99 (admittedly a bit steeper than expected). Boasting a backlit LCD screen, the system is fully compatible with all Game Boy Advance games, and three interchangeable faceplates—one the Micro's unique features—will be included with two different colors of hardware; the black hardware will come with silver, camouflage and flame, while the silver hardware will include black, ladybug (a pink flower image with a ladybug to the side) and ammonite (a swirling blue pattern). Nintendo has also announced that other faceplates will be sold separately. Truly hardcore players will have no choice but to go straight to their favorite Japanese importer and get the special red-and-gold Famicom-themed Game Boy Micro. The Micro will hit Japan about a week prior to its U.S. release, where it will also be available in blue and purple along with silver and black.



SQUARE SEQUEL UPDATES

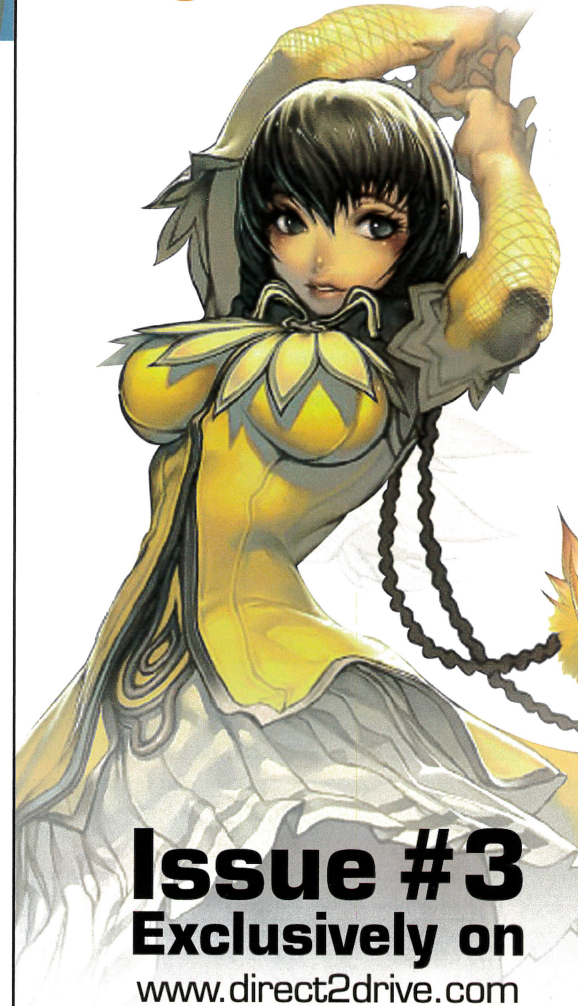
New info on latest Kingdom Hearts and Final Fantasy games

Everybody wants to know what's going on with two of the PlayStation 2's most anticipated games—Final Fantasy XII and Kingdom Hearts II—and new details have finally emerged. First and foremost, at the Square Party 2005 event held in Japan this summer, Final Fantasy XII finally received an official Japanese release date: March 16, 2006. More surprisingly, Square Enix announced that the game's director, Yasumi Matsuno (known for Final Fantasy Tactics and Vagrant Story), is no longer in charge of the project. Whether Matsuno left the role by choice or not remains unclear, but replacing him will be Akitoshi Kawazu (whose credits include Unlimited Saga and the Saga Frontier titles); Matsuno continues to contribute as scenario writer and consultant. In less volatile news, Square Enix revealed that singer Angela Aki will perform FF XII's theme song, "Kiss Me Goodbye," while Utada Hikaru, who performed "Simple and Clean" for the original Kingdom Hearts, will be returning for the sequel with a theme song titled "Passion." Sadly, both games still lack final North American release dates.



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ea / ps2, xb

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FIFA Soccer 06
ea / ps2, xb, gc, pc

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X-Men Legends II
activision / ps2, xb, gc

The X-Men unite with Magneto's Brotherhood of Mutants to battle the evil of Apocalypse in this top-down action-RPG sequel.

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Burnout Revenge ea / ps2, xb
02	Rainbow Six: Lockdown ubisoft / ps2, xb, gc
03	FIFA Soccer 06 ea / ps2, xb, gc, pc
04	Burnout Legends ea / psp
05	Madden NFL 06 ea / ps2, xb, gc, pc
06	Marvel Nemesis ea / ps2, xb, gc, psp
07	Ultimate Spider-Man activision / ps2, xb, gc
08	X-Men Legends II activision / ps2, xb, gc
09	NHL 06 ea / ps2, xb, gc, pc
10	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06 ea / ps2, xb, gc, psp



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten July Game Sales

01	NCAA Football 06 electronic arts / ps2
02	NCAA Football 06 electronic arts / xb
03	Halo 2 Map Pack microsoft / xb
04	Pokémon Emerald nintendo / gba
05	Fantastic Four activision / ps2
06	Destroy All Humans! thq / ps2
07	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas rockstar / xb
08	Lego Star Wars eidos / ps2
09	Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition rockstar / psp
10	Star Wars: Battlefront lucasarts / ps2



Top 5 Now Playing and Reader Selections

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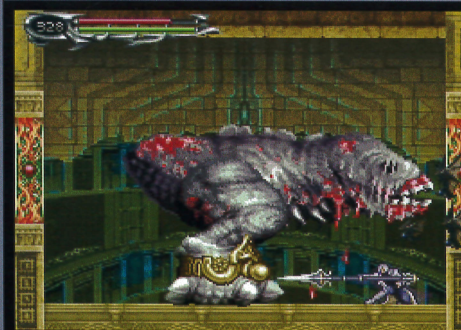
Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess nintendo / gc
02	Final Fantasy XII square enix / ps2
03	Darkwatch capcom / ps2, xb
04	Kingdom Hearts II square enix / ps2
05	Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow konami / ds



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow konami / ds
02	Gunstar Super Heroes sega / gba
03	Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves sony / ps2
04	Shadow the Hedgehog sega / xb
05	Painkiller: Hell Wars dreamcatcher / xb



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	Condemned: Criminal Origins sega / 360
02	Call of Duty II activision / 360
03	Ninja Gaiden Black tecmo / xb
04	Resident Evil 4 capcom / ps2
05	Mario Superstar Baseball nintendo / gc



Chris Hoffman some editor

01	Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow konami / ds
02	Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney capcom / ds
03	Trauma Center: Under the Knife atlas / ds
04	WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006 thq / ps2
05	Castlevania: Curse of Darkness konami / ps2

Michael Hobbs art director

01	Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow nintendo / ds
02	Nintendogs nintendo / ds
03	Meteos nintendo / ds
04	Mario Superstar Baseball nintendo / gc
05	Advance Wars: Dual Strike nintendo / ds

Ashley Esqueda associate editor/internet director

01	We Love Katamari namco / ps2
02	Nintendogs nintendo / ds
03	Guild Wars ncsoft / pc
04	City of Heroes ncsoft / pc
05	DDR Extreme 2 konami / ps2

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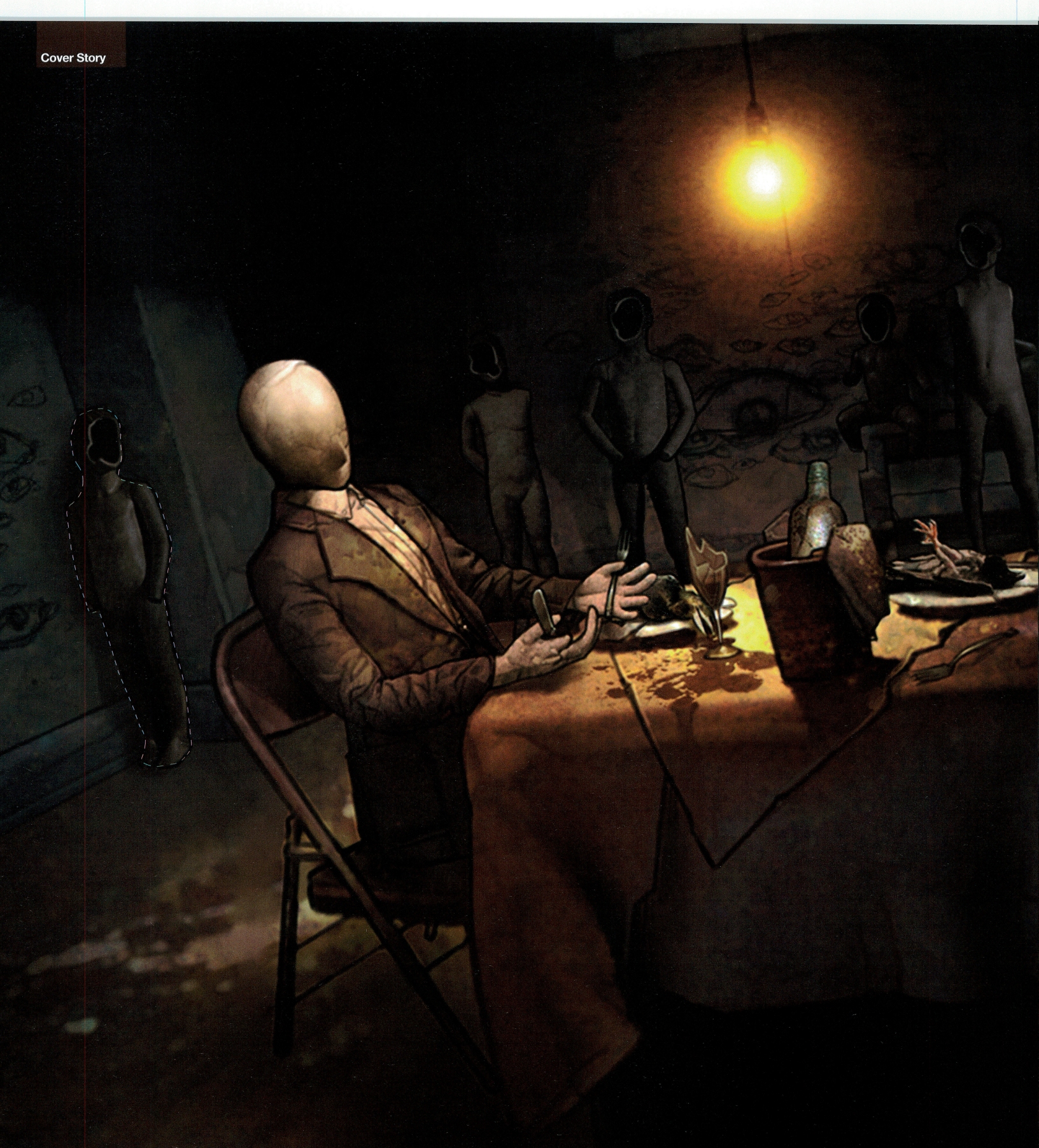
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CONDEMNED:

Criminal Origins

Enter the mad world of serial killers

Words Brady Flechter



In every man's soul exists a corner of darkness. Most of us keep the door wisely closed. But that doesn't mean we're not fascinated by what we see when we peer inside the minds of those who indulge their horrors to evil extremes. We fear evil, and we also embrace its primal perversions. To brush up against the wicked is to experience our most uncomfortable, most powerful emotion. No wonder interacting with darkness and despair in a fantasy world can be such a unique rush.

Condemned: Criminal Origins wants to take us to that place of discomfort, of gruesome imagery and personal dread. It wants to inject a visceral core into what might normally be observed in detachment. It wants you to feel the charge of pure madness in the belly of your gut, while striking equal fear in the mind. And with the drive of entirely new technology behind it, it's filled with obvious possibilities beyond any horror game before it. "Let's be clear: there have been outstanding suspense/horror games made on prior-generation hardware," says Dave Hasle, producer for Condemned. "The impact of next-gen hardware is that it allows us to create an unprecedented level of immersion with technologies such as dynamic per pixel lighting, high-definition graphics, new technologies for shadows, greater resolution of textures, Havok Physics 3.0 technology... It's really an amazing palette of tools to take the horror experience to a level that gamers haven't seen before."

All that tech stuff sounds great on paper, especially when it's packaged with geek-driven anticipation of new hardware, but just wait till you see what it ultimately affords: the way light plays off surfaces, carving out tactile dimension and really building in a sense of deeper, three-dimensional space; the sheer detail

of environmental objects and variety of texture and art; the sharp density and immersive shape and form of the world and its inhabitants. Something as simple as looking through a viewfinder on a camera is strangely transfixing, as the effect takes on such a believable presence of an object in your actual hand, capturing an actual image. You feel more like you're existing in an actual space, similar to the senses of our own reality, with the explicit fantasy coating taking it all to a hypnotic dimension.

"We think we're going to offer the player something unique and special," says Hasle. Of course, as much as the newfound freedom of the Xbox 360 is a part of what defines the achievement, the traditional storytelling and artistry and keen design for a macabre world are no less important. The game is being billed as a psychological thriller; the involvement goes far beyond the typical first-person action quotient, with so much of what you soak in, uncover and discover about your place within the horror of the world building the experience. There's a drive for a "sense of self-involvement. We want the player to get swept up in the unfolding events of the storyline, the mind's eye moments and the strange sightings and events happening around the player," Hasle points out.

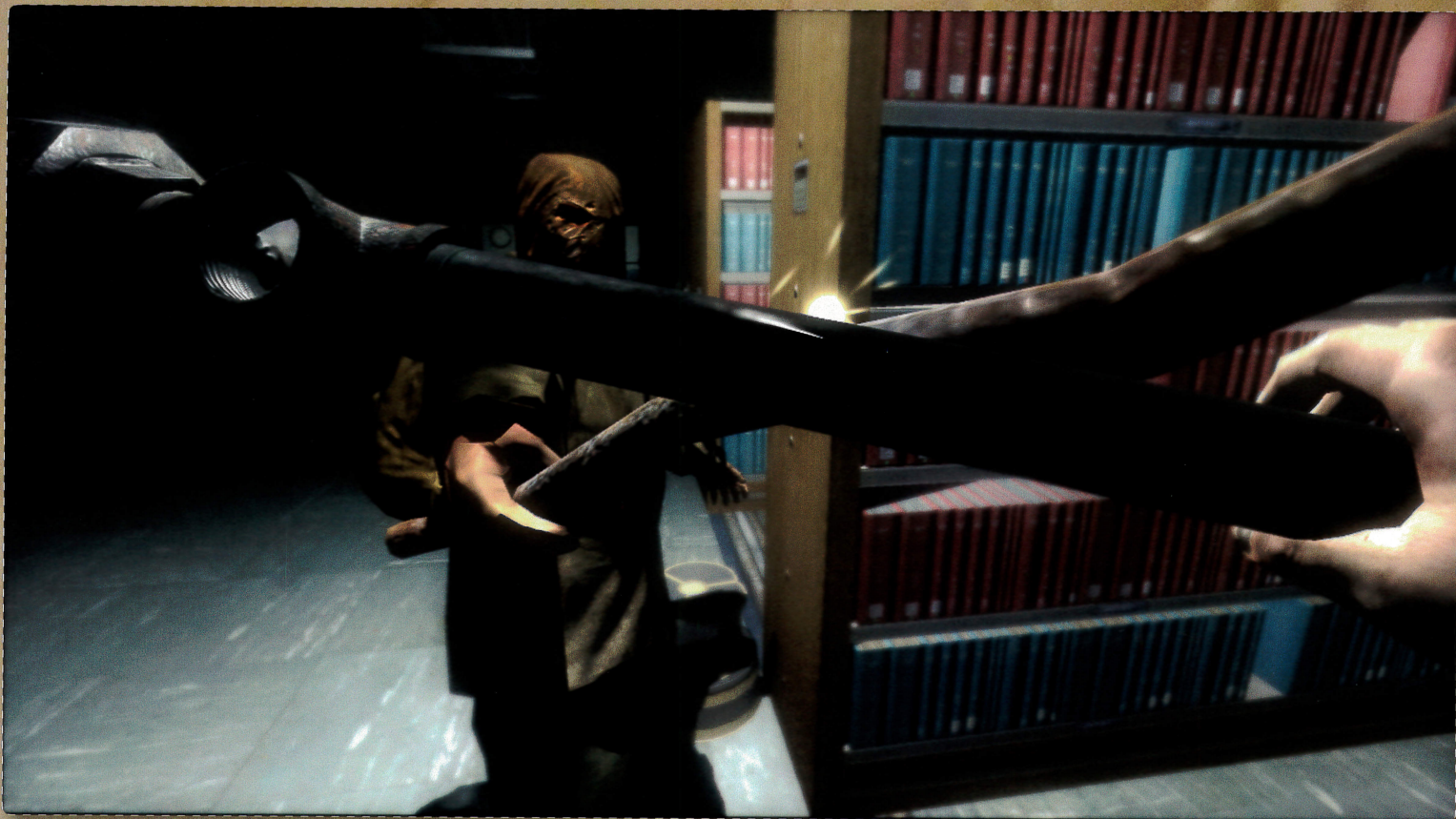
As an FBI forensics agent tracking serial

killers, your place in the story isn't what it initially seems. After blundering your last case, living on edge, your peers are a little more questioning, which doesn't help matters when you're framed for the murder of a fellow officer. Part of the journey is exoneration, and a big part is a self-discovery: exactly what is this descent into your own personal hell, this strange intrinsic bond with the killers you are tracking? As the game progresses, your vision starts to blur, indicating... what, exactly, is part of the discovery. "There is a presence that

impacts [you] as well as the enemies in the game—but you'll need to play the game to find out what this influence is," says Hasle.

One of the more interesting components to Condemned is the detection and subsequent gathering of evidence left at the crime scene. "The main character has great natural instincts that allow him to know when evidence is about. It's in these instinct zones that the player is prompted to pull out their detection and collection devices for evidence. When prompted, a single button will automatically select the





“...exactly what is this descent into your own personal hell, this strange intrinsic bond with the killers you are tracking?”

If you don't block, you die.



appropriate detection device," explains Hasle. "The detection tools range from a UV light, a device that detects blood and other substances invisible to the naked eye, to a gas spectrometer, a device that monitors airborne foreign substances such as fumes, smoke and electrical currents. Once evidence is detected, another single button press readies the appropriate collection device, which ranges from a digital camera to a sampler—a device that evaluates the chemical makeup of a piece of evidence."

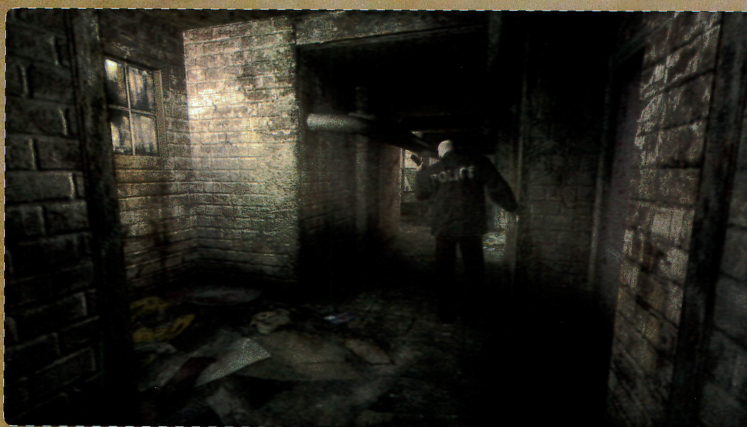
Early on, you'll come across your first case involving The Matchmaker, a shabby, pathetic SOB who likes to kill women and pose them as his lovers. Upon entering the crime scene in an old abandoned warehouse, faceless mannequins scattered about, you discover a dead woman lying on the ground, strapped to the chair. Upon examination, you discover the killer is right handed and missing a thumb, evidenced from the choke marks on her throat. The detail is sickening.

"I actually would have liked to have pushed it further," Hasle exclaims. "Yes, we're gruesome and over the top at times, but we did stay away from certain subjects

Someone's had
a rough day...

"So no flying body parts, huh? Instead, you get shattered teeth—a rusty pipe to the face of a charging enemy does mighty fine damage."





"We want to have those freaky, scary moments – but we're also striving for the psychological aspect where we get to f*ck with the player's head."

Dave Hasle, producer, *Condemned*

and certain scenes as we did not just want to go for the shock factor. The only issue we have debated was the act of dismemberment. We considered having enemy dismemberment from combat, but then when you came to a crime scene that featured dismemberment, the player has been numbed to the scene due to combat—so we kept dismemberment out of combat and saved it for crime scenes and such."

So no flying body parts, huh? Instead, you get shattered teeth—a rusty pipe to the face of a charging enemy does mighty fine damage. And when you're throwing around such weapons as a 2x4 with protruding nails—almost anything can be ripped out of the environment as a tool for death—blood loss is another given. Some enemies will even vomit up the stuff in severe pain.

The combat in the game isn't what you might normally expect from a first-person perspective. "With most FPS-style games, you're literally a superhero that can take a lot of damage, and you usually have some form of advantage over your opponents," says Hasle. "In *Condemned*, the enemies use the same weapons you do. They

usually have a better idea of your position than you have of theirs, and they can strike at any time... We want the player to continually explore their environment and do it carefully instead of blundering forward like so many people do in shooters, just trying to trigger the next action."

While there are firearms to keep enemies at a distance, melee combat plays the central role in battle, with weapons ranging in a rating of speed, blocking, reach and damage; you're not going to find ammo lying around, so when your gun is spent, you've now got an instrument for bludgeoning. Up close and brutally personal, the fights can be drawn out and insanely impactful, causing you to wince even after you've been hardened to the experience. There are no combos or crazy moves to pull off, no shooting gallery scenarios with bullets flying. Basically, you go in with one heavy swing of your weapon, block with a slow, singular timed response. It's very much how you might imagine a confrontation in real life if you were tossing around a heavy axe. "We wanted to provide something straight-forward, clean and intuitive. We actually have more aspects to

combat than most games," explains Hasle. "...With the ammo limited and no ammo packs plus weapons stashed throughout the environments, we feel the player is going to find something simple yet special in the combat pacing. Fight with your rebar, go for a headshot for better damage, the enemy falls to his knees, step up and finish him off with a sudden fist to the face and then kick him when he's down. The next guy has a shotgun so you Taser him, stride up to him, take his gun away and turn around and shoot him with it. We feel it is the magic of the different components and the AI that will give the player a unique, chaotic, guttural combat experience."

The way the enemy reacts to you is one of the more frightening aspects of *Condemned*. I like how they won't just come charging straight ahead for the kill, instead retreating into the shadows, trying to ambush you, hiding for the right moment. If they notice your weapon, they may decide to go after a better one for themselves, or call on a friend to join in on the fun. They'll even knock out light sources, which not only looks cool, but ratchets up the tension even more. It's one



There's no such thing as too dark...



"It's one thing facing someone head-on; knowing they're on the move somewhere around you...is an entirely different mode of adrenaline."

thing facing someone head-on; knowing they're on the move somewhere around you, hearing buckets getting knocked over, screams, glass shattering, is an entirely different mode of adrenaline.

Outside of the key serial killers lurking in the stages, the more frequent minions are essentially dregs of society. "The crime rate has taken off and the local birds are acting strangely," says Hasle. "People who have a propensity for crime are now taking their crimes to a new level of savagery. These locations that you travel through seem to be focal points that attract these individuals—all bent upon harming anyone who comes near them."

Condemned takes place somewhere in the near future, somewhere in a city that you really don't want to live in. Every location represents some abandoned, dilapidated structure, from a department store and children's recreational center to a scorched library and metro subway. "We used a film location scout for our environments. It worked extremely well and we ended up taking over 25 gigs worth of images with many going directly into the

game as textures," explains Hasle. "It was extremely helpful in allowing us to get a very realistic set of creepy environments."

And as for creating the nasty blueprints to build the rest? "We researched serial killers, their killing methods, and tried to understand people's morbid fascination with serial killers," says Hasle. "We were heavily influenced by movies and television. *Silence of the Lambs*, *Se7en* and *28 Days Later* all had a strong impact on what we're trying to make—plus splatter in some strong *CSI*-like elements to round it out. Our lead game designer ripped scenes from hundreds of movies that we watched to help keep us in the mood."

Obviously, with a mood-driven game like this, and with new technology underfoot to foster greater ambition, sound becomes an invaluable tool to exploring our emotions. The clanking of the crowbar and pounding of feet behind you. The crunch to the gut and pounding of flesh. The crackle of fire and whoosh of a draft. It's all represented to chilling effect. "To craft the proper tension and pacing of a psychological thriller, you simply have to do sound right in all aspects:

background music, effects for combat and interactive objects, atmospheric sound effects, in-game voices and dialogue, pacing music, audio cues, everything," details Hasle. "To maximize the impact of sound in *Condemned*, we sent our sound engineers down to Warner Brothers Studios to work with their foley artists to create the most realistic, movie-quality sound effects possible."

So be honest: is your goal to scare us shitless? "This is definitely a part of it. We want to have those freaky, scary moments—but we're also striving for the psychological aspect where we get to f'ck with the player's head," says Hasle. "There will be hallucinations where you don't know if what you're seeing is real or fake, and there is also the player progression as you hopefully find yourself becoming more violent as you become under the influence of your...shall we say, surroundings...over the course of the game."

Most games that depict horror tend to stick with heavy fantasy elements, throwing monsters into the scene and disregarding the grounding of a recognizable reality.

Condemned instantly feels removed from the norm, and it's refreshing.

"We have chosen to place *Condemned* in a realistic context because it allows us to start from the known fear and feelings of aversion that surround serial killers and expand from there to create a damn scary experience," says Hasle. "I also want to say, and I think most people would agree, that the best moments of suspense and horror in movies/books/games are those that combine a realistic natural fear with ideas and new experiences that you weren't expecting. This is the goal of *Condemned: Criminal Origins*."

Condemned: Criminal Origins

Xbox 360

Preview

Point of Interest

This is developer Monolith's first console effort.

Developer: Monolith Publisher: Sega

Online: TBA Available: System Launch



The Art of the Game

Top industry artists converge on conceptart.org to display their talents

The thing about video games that make them so special is that we're given free reign to explore worlds, to interact with magnificent creatures of fantasy, to travel through spaces that could only live in the imagination. Without the power of art generating the visions we encounter, the modern video game becomes lifeless.

Before the polygons and textures give form to these visions, an artist must dream up the blueprints for the foundation. It's known as concept art, and the quality of the design can make or break a game before it even begins. Finding that talented artist who's right for the job can be an enormous undertaking in game design; it's not easy locating that perfect match, and especially difficult is the path down which an artist must take to get his work exposed. Bridging that gap is a grass-roots effort known as Conceptart.org—a

rich stomping ground for artists of all successes and talents to get together and share their work, discuss technique and help each other in disseminating their creations. "First and foremost, we are a community of artists dedicated to helping each other learn, grow and further both our personal art as well as design in the games and film industries," explains Jason Manley, the founder of Conceptart.org. "We are open to everyone, as long as they do art."

That's one of the coolest aspects of the melting pot of talent: anyone can get involved, and if you've ever tried to submit your work on a professional level, you know how difficult it can be to get someone to bite. Conceptart.org organizes workshops around the world, where companies like EA, Sony, Activision, Gray Matter, id Software, Blizzard, Flagship Studios and more attend. And with the site housing tons of images from an enormous cache of artists, gamemakers are constantly plugged in to the specific talent they're searching for. "I haven't had to bring a portfolio to a client in three years," says Manley. "If I post something and there is even one thing wrong, it gets picked out; expectations are at their highest point since I've been doing this. Artists here bare a bit of their souls."

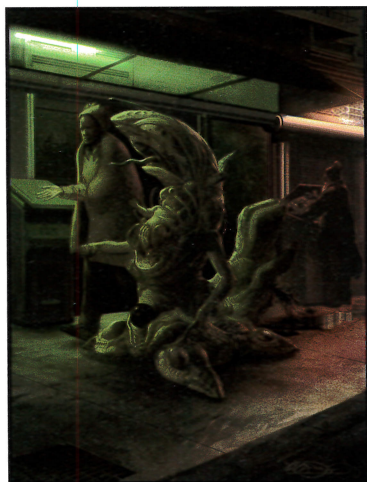
For someone like you or I who share a love of games, a community like this is an important step in fostering increasingly

richer, more visionary worlds. And as technology goes through a watershed stage of evolution, art integrity has never been so crucial. "To be honest, I think what we've done has indeed raised the quality of artistry in games," says Manley. "The companies I visit...we do a lot of consulting now...they have thanked me for helping bring up the quality of concept design. I heard that from both Sony and Bioware."

If you're someone who treasures art in games, Conceptart.org is a wonderful gallery to view simply from a fan level, where you can click through images from such talents as Andrew Jones, who

created the designs for Metroid Prime. If you're a budding artist contemplating school, Conceptart.org and Massive Black Inc. are even offering a \$10K scholarship for students to compete for via resume, portfolio and essay. "Art scholarships are almost impossible to find," Manley points out. "To my knowledge, no other game community or company is doing this sort of thing." And if you're serious about working in the industry as a professional concept artist or simply want to share in your passion with others, Manley certainly believes strongly in what he has to offer: "It's our one shred of dignity as artists working in this industry." Brady Fiechter

"...a rich stomping ground for artists of all successes and talents..."



Drawing from the pool of top artists who've converged on Conceptart.org, the company Massive Black Inc. formed to work as a creative team. These images are a few samples of what they've developed internally.



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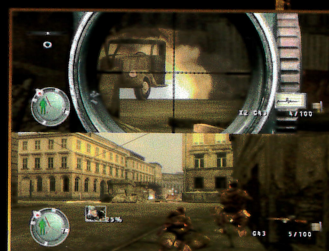
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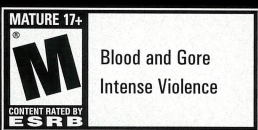
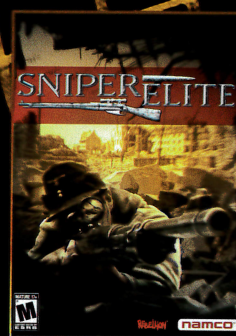
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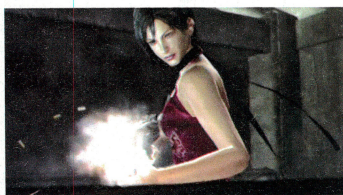
4

Resident Evil

A modern classic goes to PS2 with impressive results

"...one visually stunning, insanely intense, masterfully creative and terrifically fun game."

Ada's getting more attention on the PS2, with a new level added on a battleship.



Resident Evil 4 on the GameCube was perhaps the best of the Resident Evils. To see it on nearly every Top 10 list this year is almost guaranteed. Once sworn by Capcom not to be on the PlayStation 2, it's now on PlayStation 2, remaining a virtuosic mix of action, horror and adventure. If you're dying to bemoan how this difficult transplant has emerged a bit diminished, you simply don't get it and fail to see an amazing achievement in its own right. No, this new look at Resident Evil 4 is not the GameCube version, but when you can get past this moot point, you'll experience one visually stunning, insanely intense, masterfully creative and terrifically fun game.

Some subtle changes here and there to the level design will provide amusement to anyone who's ripped apart the game already, but the biggest shakeup is with the play from Ada's perspective. Five chapters have been added, shedding a different light on the story and providing a new level on a battleship. A few weapons have been added as well, along with costume upgrades: Leon's got a suit and Ashley can don a knight costume, which provides increased protection and weight to ward off capture. And my favorite addition: the game supports true widescreen, which was indeed a disappointing exclusion on the GameCube.

With this excuse to tackle Resident Evil 4 for the third time, I'm no less impressed by the presentation and imaginative design of it all, the skill and energy of the direction. The opening farm sequence, set in some rural area of a fictional Spain, is one of the great set pieces in games, looking less like a polygonal construct and more like a real place of doom. The zombies of old are gone, replaced by evil farmhands who go about their business in a cult-like stupor, and various other oddities, from cloaked religious beings to human experiments gone horrifically wrong. There's certainly a familiar Resident Evil vibe lurching through the shadows, but with such killer touches as the context-sensitive action sequences and more controllable, dynamic combat, the game feels like a triumphant extension of the classically old and creatively new. If you love the best of what video games have to offer, you must play Resident Evil 4.
Brady Fiechter

Resident Evil 4

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

The Resident Evil series has sold over 28 million copies worldwide.

Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom

Online: None Available: October



Widescreen is a beautiful thing.





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Metal Gear Solid 3

SUBSISTENCE

Have your Snake and eat it too

Hideo Kojima put big exclamation marks over the heads of hundreds of thousands of gamers when he announced Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence this past May. While the enhanced version of the incredible MGS3: Snake Eater—with new features like an over-the-shoulder camera, boss duel mode, cutscene theater and emulated versions of the 8-bit MSX Metal Gear games—is tantalizing, it's really the all-new, long-anticipated online mode that players can't wait to sink their teeth into...and the latest juicy info from Konami makes it sound all the more delicious.

Five modes will comprise Subsistence's online component: Sneaking Mission, Capture Mission, Rescue Mission, Deathmatch and Team Deathmatch. Sneaking Mission, previously referred to as the "Snake vs. Enemies" mode at this year's E3, puts one player in the role of Snake and up to seven others as enemy soldiers as Snake tries to steal an object guarded by his adversaries. Although player-controlled enemies will obviously be more capable than average guards, they'll still be prone to Snake's tricks, like getting distracted by a mature-content magazine should they wander across one. Capture Mission, as its name implies, is essentially the MGS version of Capture the Flag, with teams of four trying to obtain an item and take it back to HQ; similarly, Rescue Mission has an object already in

the possession of one team, with the other team trying to steal it back or destroy it. As for Deathmatch and Team Deathmatch, they're pretty much what you'd expect, only featuring a full complement of that famous Metal Gear gear—even cardboard boxes.

Whatever mode you select, you'll have plenty of choices available. Players can align themselves with KGB, GRU or Ocelot units (although it's unknown if this will affect your weapon choices or movesets), and high-ranking players can even access skins of notable Metal Gear characters like Commander Raikov, Ocelot or Snake himself. There will also be several environments to battle in, including brand-new areas like a modern urban downtown setting, a small forest, a factory and something dubbed the "Kill House," along with settings from MGS3, like Krasnogorje Mountain, the Graniny Gorki Lab and the woods of Svyatogornyj East. Other locales are yet to be revealed.

Now that Metal Gear's going online, that next neck you snap could belong to your best friend. And you'll probably both enjoy it. **Chris Hoffman**

Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

At a recent press event, Konami representatives didn't deny the possibility of an Xbox version of Subsistence.

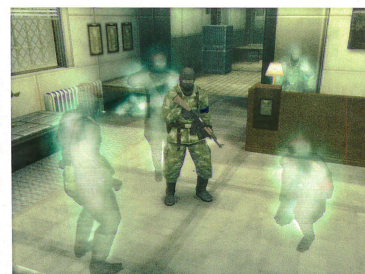
Developer: Kojima Productions **Publisher:** Konami

Online: 8p versus/co-op **Available:** Early 2006

Proficient players will unlock skins for officer characters like Ocelot.



"...featuring a full complement of that famous Metal Gear gear—even cardboard boxes."



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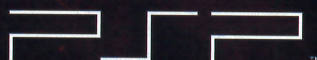


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Tony Hawk's American Wasteland

Don't be a skater-hater

Expanding on the formula that made Tony Hawk's Underground successful, Activision and Neversoft Entertainment have created American Wasteland, boasting no load times, new tricks, BMX riding (watch out, Mat Hoffman!) and a vast environment that'll make any skater giddy. Watching AW in action, you can't help but stare in awe as you watch your skater take on the streets of Los Angeles, comboing on everything and anything you can drop your board on. The scope and scale of THAW's map is only compounded by the fact that just about everything is trick-able, and the

ride across town is completely seamless and load free. Adopting more of a GTA-like environment seems to be paying off for this installment. Here's the scoop on THAW from the folks at Neversoft Entertainment... Ashley Esqueda



Interview **Brian Bright, producer, Neversoft** Conducted by **Dave Halverson**

play: You busted the skating game wide open with the first Underground by combining action off the board and a GTA-like setting plugged into the skating formula. How does American Wasteland further your vision of a truly seamless action/interactive landscape?

Brian Bright: This is by far the biggest, most ambitious Tony Hawk game ever made. We've created a giant, streaming Los Angeles filled with persistent skate, bike and graffiti missions. There are numerous side missions and over 40 area-changing events that will have players bringing pieces of the city back to their skate ranch to build the ultimate skate park. Gamers can customize their characters without ever leaving the game with skate shops, clothing stores, barbershops, accessory shops and tattoo parlors scattered throughout the city. Characters you interact with earlier in the game will remember you in later encounters. There is a true time of day cycle and places throughout the city where you can just kick it and take a nap. Some missions are linked in with the time of day, and there are many ways to earn cash.

How difficult was it to accommodate the BMX elements?

The toughest thing was getting the two-point collision to work properly in our environment. We worked through all the issues and have created the most fun freestyle BMX physics in any game ever. I can only say that because I have first-hand BMX game experience from producing the

Mat Hoffman titles.

You're doing some crazy stuff with the dual analogs too; can you elaborate on that?

The BMX controls are completely analog: the left stick controls the rider's weight distribution and is used for tricks like leaning, flipping and getting into a manual or wheelie; the right stick whips parts of the bike or player around for tailwhips, barspins, decades, crankflips and so on. The shoulder buttons control the front and back brakes, enabling players to do nose picks, tail taps, endos, etc. The tricks are more freeform on the BMX, allowing for maximum creativity.

What about character creation? Can we fashion either a male or female once again?

Male and female characters can be created in Classic mode, Free-skate, co-op, two-player and online modes. In story mode, players can only choose a male character. The reason for this is that we wanted to create an engaging story and give the player an attitude and a larger speaking role.

With the PS2 as your core platform, how do the Xbox and 360 games compare respectively?

The game looks awesome across all platforms. The Xbox 360 version has much higher-resolution textures and normal mapped characters, props and vehicles. It runs in 720p as well, so it



"This is by far the biggest, most ambitious Tony Hawk game ever made."

Brian Bright, producer, Neversoft

looks super-sharp and has the luxury of having four shoulder buttons. Both Xbox and Xbox 360 versions support Xbox Live, and the Xbox 360 also supports new achievements, rich presence and rankings for its version of Live.

How labor-intensive is it to juice the textures, normal or bump map, and poly-up the models for 360? Are you happy to do the port or wishing you'd created the 360 game from the ground up? With visuals like Gears of War and Kameo's out there, the pressure must be on....

American Wasteland is a great game across all platforms for its incredible gameplay. With that said, our Xbox 360 version is graphically superior to the current gen versions of the game and will support Live features specific to the 360, such as new achievements, rich presence and rankings.

Are you also able to expand the line of sight and go load free for the duration?

Once players arrive in Hollywood, there are no loading screens. Everything is in the game, including character customization, creating graffiti tags, editing tricks and getting on and off the bike. "No Loading Screens" has been the mantra for the project since day one.

Does Tony have the same level of involvement after all these years, or is he confident to lay back and let you guys have at it?

Tony continues to be very involved and comes in from time to time to show us new moves and educate us on skate culture and history. All the skaters in the game visit Neversoft a few times during production to go over their character models, record VO and design their special tricks.

Are you going the toilet-humor route again a la Viva La Bam?

American Wasteland skips the potty humor and is still really funny. Having legendary skater Tony Alva involved helped us create a skating adventure true to the roots of skateboarding.

Are you afraid that going more for flow and finesse over crude that you might lose the core audience? Have you ever tossed around doing a more exaggerated stylized version akin to, say, Jet Set Radio? Go ahead and punish me for suggesting that if you must.

In American Wasteland, we have embraced the punk/thrash look of the early-to-mid-1980s and infused that style into every aspect of the game. We hired renowned skateboard artist Jimbo Phillips to create a new look for the game's cinematics, and this graphical treatment makes American Wasteland appear stylistically different from any previous Tony Hawk game.

With the recent popularity of the Dog Town years and the more flowing styles wide boards and surf style afforded, are you plugging more variety of styles into the game? Any backyard pool scenes, etc.? It'd be so cool to do old-school coping grinds and lay backs...

Tony Alva has a pretty large role in the game, and we've added a move he's known for performing called the Bert Slide, which is basically a layback. With this new trick, there is a modifier mechanic that allows players to pull variations like the 540 Bert. The Bert Slide can also be used to gain speed and link tricks like the revert and manual from previous games. **play**

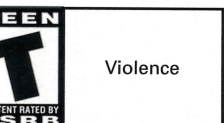


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SSX ON TOUR

Both bitchin' and gnarly, SSX continues to prove this series is the best out there



"...movie-quality creative professionalism that goes beyond most of what you've seen in the industry."



Riding a snowboarding series through a fourth installment on the same generation of hardware may seem like EA is pushing the limit, but with each installment getting that much better, SSX On Tour has no difficulties getting your extreme-sport blood pumping the second the wildly stylized opening animation drops. EA's slathered this thing in hip, and like it or not, it has that movie-quality creative professionalism that goes beyond most of what you've seen in the industry.

Grabbed by the insanely cool sketchbook attractions, you're still right at home in this latest SSX as the game opens, offering you different riders, gear, styles and events. Progression opens stuff, stuff gets you more abilities and attitude, you feel pleasantly rewarded. Twelve big new slopes are a nice touch, but the fundamentals aren't so dramatically rearranged that an expert could possibly find any confusion shredding down the obstacle-ridden courses. I felt right at home grabbing air, sliding on rails and racking up mondo points as I carved maniacally toward the finish line. Building up boost is, of course, paramount to success, and you get rewarded with more juice by techniques like seeing how close you

can come to wiping out your competition and those poor innocents lazily enjoying the slopes alongside you, like tubers and skiers. And as much fun as it is to taunt skiers in SSX On Tour, you even get to become one if you so chose. The dynamics behind the tricks don't change all that much, but the speed and added maneuverability are a lot of fun and bring enough of a new look and feel to the game to justify the addition.

There does seem to be a robust amount of new events to keep the series alive, with major additions marked by the Shred Challenge—build a reputation before hitting the tour—and the alter ego choice: develop your character as a boarder or skier and take the persona to the slopes to duel it out. It'll be hard to top SSX3, but from what I've seen so far, SSX On Tour is up to the challenge.

Brady Fiechter

SSX On Tour

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PSP

Point of Interest

This is the first time the series has included skiing.

Developer: EA Canada Publisher: Electronic Arts

Online: None Available: October



Snowboarding fans will enjoy taking out the skiers polluting the slopes.

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TRUE CRIME NEW YORK CITY

Crimes, like virtues, are their own rewards -George Farquhar

Marcus Reed was living fast and dangerous, running one of New York City's most influential crime syndicates alongside his father Isaiah "The King" Reed. His life takes an unexpected turn though when his gang turns the tables...and orders a hit on Marcus and his father. After Marcus and Isaiah both survive the hit, Marcus makes his way back to the gang's headquarters, bloodthirsty for revenge.

After Marcus rubs out the rest of the traitorous gang members, his mentor Terrence Higgins (an old friend of Isaiah's and an NYC detective) tells him this will be the last time he cleans up after Marcus...and five years later, Marcus becomes a full-fledged NYC detective. On the day he earns his badge though, Terrence is mysteriously killed, prompting Marcus to investigate the real cause of his friend's death. Welcome to the tale that is True Crime: NYC.

The story here is deeper and sleeker than the original True Crime, and it only gets better with some high-profile names taking the mic for voiceover: Mickey Rourke (Terrence Higgins), Traci Lords (a high-priced Madame), Laurence Fishburne (Isaiah) and Christopher Walken (a "Deep Throat" FBI man) have all lent their voices to True Crime's tale. Rapper and tri-state area native Redman has contributed two original songs to the game's soundtrack, which features artists from or associated with New York City. He will also make an appearance in game (although Luxoflux wouldn't reveal how).

NYC's gameplay has changed a bit from the original, and there are a slew of new features to discuss. Learnable fighting styles like Tae Kwon Do and karate will allow you to choose how you throw down with NYC's most dangerous criminals, and highly interactive environments make fighting highly interesting and even (dare I say it?) entertaining in some cases. I was delighted to watch Marcus toss a goon into a plastic molder...said goon's body parts came out on the other side shaped into two bloody Statues of Liberty!

Your decision to be a good cop or a bad cop dictates quite a few things in NYC. The game's ending is tailored to the way you've conducted yourself as a New York City detective, and there are dynamic changes to the city if you decide to let crime run rampant (or clean up the city of crooks). Businesses will open/close depending on how dangerous an area is, and the appearance of the neighborhood will either deteriorate

NPCs will respond to your interrogation tactics in different ways.



or sparkle depending on how much crime you stop/allow.

Overall, the game's progressing nicely. I'm most excited about the VO (because who doesn't get giddy about Chris Walken and Mickey Rourke?), but the game itself is certainly rising to the "sophomore franchise title" challenge. True Crime: NYC is a title we'll be keeping the (big) apple of our eyes on. Ashley Esqueda



"...the appearance of the neighborhood will either deteriorate or sparkle depending on how much crime you stop/allow."

True Crime: New York City

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GC

Point of Interest

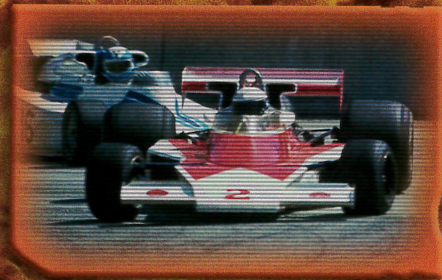
NYC's map will feature more than 30 neighborhoods to explore, many of them GPS-accurate.

Developer: Luxoflux, Inc. Publisher: Activision

Online: None Available: Fall 2005

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KING KONG

Royal rumble

Hail to the King. The giant ape Kong, 50 percent misunderstood behemoth, 200 percent unrepentant ass-kicker, has seen his share of bad days. In the 72 years since his triumphant black-and-white film debut, Kong has squirmed through a series of embarrassing sequels, suffered through one painful-to-watch remake and taken a trip across the Pacific to battle Godzilla in an ill-advised adventure that should have been titled *Shameful Battle of the Bad Rubber Suits*.

Be warned: Kong's days as a circus monkey are nearing their end. Famed director Peter Jackson (of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy) has completed a big-budget remake of the original *King Kong* set to release this holiday season. If the remake proves even half as good as the original, there will be some trampling at the box office. And if the film is one-tenth as good as the inevitable multiplatform video game translation by Ubisoft, well, then all will be right with a certain giant ape.

Kong is very much of two minds on the subject of its gameplay. When puny

human Jack Driscoll takes center stage, the game adopts a first-person perspective, and the idea is not so much kill everything that moves as much as it is try not to get devoured or trampled by everything that moves. When the game shifts to its gargantuan simian protagonist, a more cinematic third-person perspective is used and the order of the day is sweet revenge on all the creatures that were the tormentors when Driscoll was playable.

The jungle is no place for a dullard. Kong encourages creativity and smart gameplay. As Driscoll, players can use spears, pistols, sniper rifles and machine guns, but it's oftentimes best to use the super-weapon known as the cerebrum. There's a pecking order of monsters here, and a very real food chain that can be exploited. Enemies have the advantage of speed, numbers and size, and firepower won't always counter that. A rampaging Tyrannosaurus won't be killed by machine gun fire, but it can be distracted by a free meal; if Driscoll shoots a smaller enemy, it's likely he'll be able to escape while this pursuer stops to consume

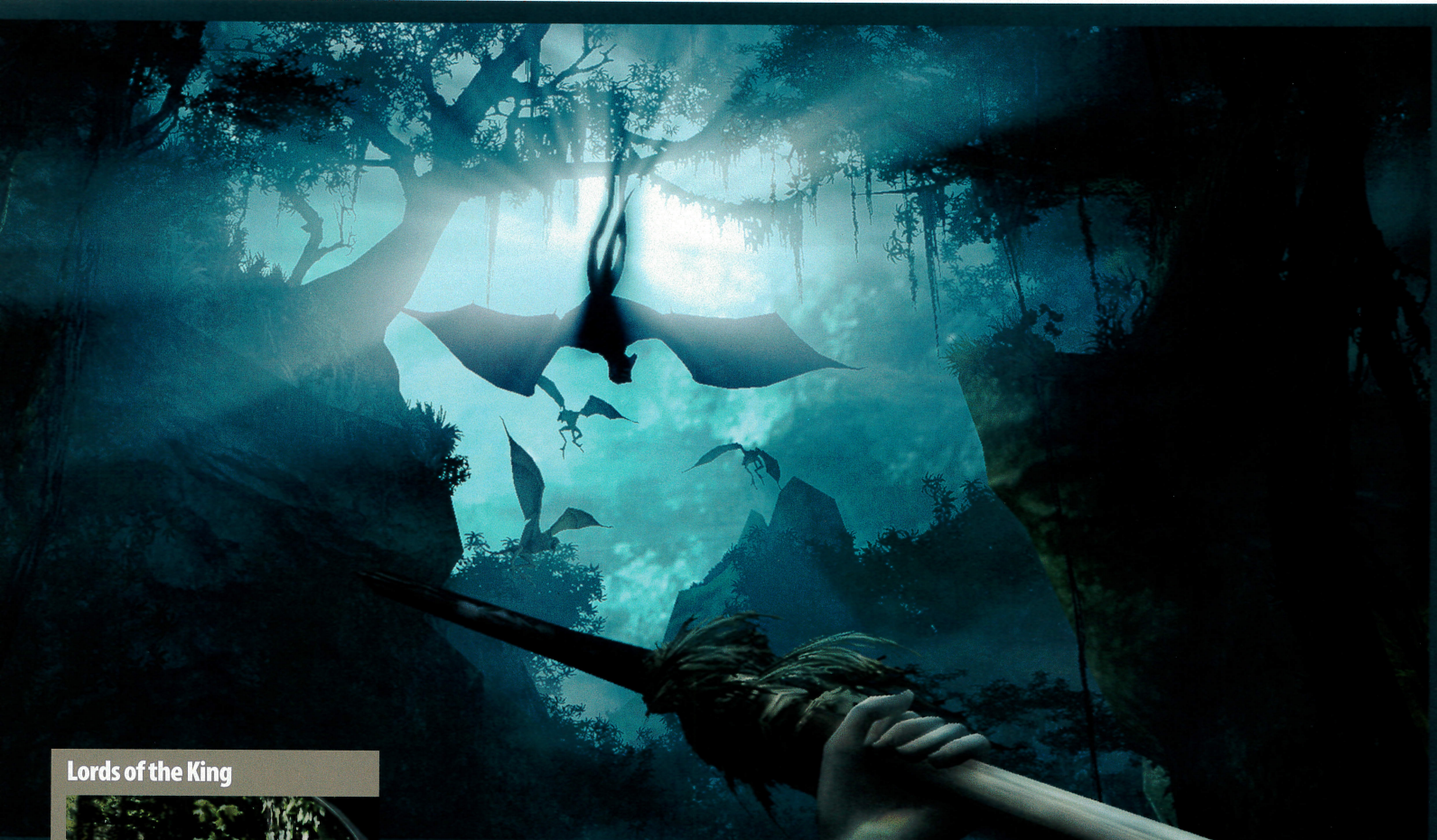


This ain't exactly *The Land Before Time*. Toss that spear!

the downed carcass. Impale a flying insect on a spear, and the result is a twitching meal on a stick enemies will chase when hurled. Grasslands can be set ablaze to create deathtraps, and proximity brings discontent—beasties can be lured close to other monsters and will set upon one another.

Kong's tribulations are no less thrilling, but there's more the sense of a giant boulder running downhill than there is an ant trying to navigate a hostile lawn. Kong bites heads off of smaller enemies, can toss corpses with the best of them and will perform jaw-ripping and back-breaking "finishing" moves on his opponents. When Kong becomes playable, the game's camera shifts, but certainly not wildly, to emphasize the size, power and majesty

"Close-ups highlight the terror; the camera zooms on dinosaurs about to sink their teeth into Kong's neck."



Lords of the King



Ubisoft's King Kong often-times flies in the face of established game logic. Beyond its insistence that players use their brains in what is, traditionally, a more action-reliant genre, the game does not provide any extraneous menus or interfaces. Aiming is done by sight. Health is only indicated by a flashing red screen and pulsing game controller. Cutscenes allow the player to scan the surroundings to see, for example, King Kong cut through the foreboding jungle haze and approach his screaming female target.

The effect is hugely cinematic, and players can thank the tag team of director Peter Jackson (inset) and game designer Michel Ancel (Rayman, Beyond Good & Evil) for this. Together, the pair has collaborated on something decidedly unique—a movie adaptation that promises to be as good as the film that inspired it, or at least one not wholly built for the sole purpose of ensuring the executives all get to buy summer homes in the Hamptons.



of it all. Close-ups highlight the terror; the camera zooms on dinosaurs about to sink their teeth into Kong's neck. More distant shots emphasize the scale of the giant beasts fighting amid human-sized ruins or massive cliffs.

In motion, the little touches make the miracle. Driscoll carries his gun over his head when he wades through pools and his hands come forth to part oversized grasses

in his path. A non-playable Jack Black as director Carl Denham dashes about madly, shooting majestic scenes while in mortal peril. Scarred T-Rexes blow spittle while roaring, and the maddened thump of stampeding brontosaurus makes the threat of being crushed seem all too real.

All the elements are in place for a monster of a game. Expect the coronation in November. *Greg Orlando*

King Kong

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC, Xbox 360

Point of Interest

Ubisoft has yet to show the game's later levels, which will definitely be set in New York to mirror the film's epic conclusion, but it remains to be seen if King Kong will scale the Empire State Building.

Developer: Ubisoft **Publisher:** Ubisoft

Online: None **Available:** November

Preview

SHADOW

THE HEDGEHOG

Go Sega black

It's time to stop lamenting over "Sonic with guns" and embrace the Sonic mayhem that is Shadow the Hedgehog. Few worship the wily Sega-indigenous hedgehog as much as I, and I can truly attest that the limited gunplay in Shadow is nothing but a blessing. The darker hedgehog in the Sega stable also wields a Cloud Strife-sized illuminated sword and an assortment of shiny chrome and cartoony alien blasters and beam weapons, so it's not all Dirty Harry in Sonic Town. And if you're still gun-shy, you can always cut down enemies in traditional Sonic style, choosing not to equip anything but Shadow's homing strikes, spin kick and broody attitude (although you get your tail kicked), which is what I find so very appealing about Shadow the Hedgehog.

As much as I love Sonic Adventure and especially Sonic Heroes, I've had more than my fill of Tails' adolescent squeal (although he is back for a spell) and predominantly sun-soaked and/or neon-lit locales where the only enemies about are Robotnik's sputtering bots and the odd behemoth worth getting up for. It's time for a change on current-gen consoles to bridge the gap between Heroes and the mighty new next-gen Sonic, which, if you've ever loved a Sonic game, you'd better break out the adult diapers before you hit start when that glorious day arrives.

In Shadow, Earth is once again under siege—this time by Black Aliens too powerful for even the mighty Sonic (and company). Enter Shadow: a troubled, confused hedgehog overwrought with haunting visions of a slain young girl and no recollection of who or what he is. In contrast to sequels past, Shadow is considerably darker than any chapter in the Sonic repertoire. Even though the entire cast individually works by his side within their designated jurisdictions, it has an edge never before seen in a Sonic game. Sonic Team has even shed the series' traditional bright veneer, replacing the colorful chapter facades with dirty black and streaks of red. This truly is the headbangers' Sonic; may it live on with its blue brethren for many years to come.

Harkening back to Adventure (sans the annoying hub and wooden models), Shadow begins his assault in a city under siege with Sonic by his side after a wraith-

like phantom offers him (Shadow) the information about his past in exchange for (what else?) emeralds. After breaching the city, however, Shadow decides to keep the emeralds for himself, inciting the phantom's wrath, who in turn pops him into a wormhole—destination Glyphic Canyon... And where there's a canyon, there's an echidna named Knuckles. These first two stages are decidedly dark, riddled with aliens, decaying ruins and violent storms, and then, just as we begin to think we're not in Kansas anymore, Sonic Team reels us back in by injecting the Shadow equivalent of Sonic's Casino level: Circus Park, reportedly constructed out of stolen rings by Eggman (according to the sniveling Tails). In Japanese, Tails (as Miles) is actually tolerable, but in English, his lobotomized banter is the type of mindless babble that makes you want

"This truly is the headbangers' Sonic; may it live on with its blue brethren for many years to come."



Familiar sights for a not-so-familiar fight.



to track down the ADR producer and make him listen to Celine Dion CDs while locked in a closet with nothing but Red Bull.

In terms of the actual gameplay, the difference here is in the start-and-stop nature of things—something I've missed dearly since the Marble Hill Zone—the sheer madness of the terrain and the demonic state of the opposition. Heroes too had its share of action areas, but Shadow's are rife with weapons, a more aggressive legion of enemies, all the switch- and device-manipulation we've come to know and love, and at times the human militia. Between the most extreme loops, air time and plunges the series has ever seen, Shadow goes ballistic on both the demonic insurgence and the military dispatched to purge them. Not that he necessarily hates human beings, but the sitting General considers Shadow armed and dangerous (even though he is techni-



cally helping) and has given the order to shoot on sight...hence the gunplay. For the record, Shadow only wounds...never kills.

In its pre-Beta state, the only malfunction I have to report are signs of this engine's tendency to annoy via the skittish camera and erratic speeds in places you want more precision over MPH—issues I'm sure are being dealt with as the game enters its final weeks of development. It also bears noting that I tested Shadow on Xbox. Unlike Heroes' poor showing on PS2, Shadow is reportedly on par with the Xbox and GameCube versions. If that's the case, Shadow is the cherry on top of the best Sega holiday lineup in its history. With Spartan: Total Warrior, Condemned, Full Auto, Gunstar Super Heroes, Sonic Rush, Shining Force Neo and Shadow all in the hopper, it's go time for Sega blue, er, make that black...just for now. **Dave Halverson**

Shadow's is a darker trek than hedgehogs past, even amidst trademark neon wonderlands.



Shadow the Hedgehog

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Preview

Point of Interest

The African Pygmy Hedgehog is now readily available and can be found in the homes of thousands of happy pet owners...

Developer: Sonic Team **Publisher:** Sega
Online: None **Available:** November



Call of Duty 2

Dropping you into the hell of war

"That intensity of war. The feeling of 'Oh my god, this is real. People actually went through this.' The emotion, the intensity—that's what we're capturing," expresses chief creative officer Vince Zampella when asked what defines the Call of Duty 2 experience in the ever-growing space of World War II first-person shooters. The idea of an authentic, slice-you-in-the-gut depiction of war is one thing, but actually delivering the raw power in a newly convincing manner is a tall order—especially when you're having to live up to what was heralded as the best of its type in Call of Duty for PC. "There's definitely a lot of pressure there, but that's what drives us," continues Zampella. "I think we put more of the pressure on ourselves just wanting to make the best game possible as much as being concerned with the scrutiny of fans."

For those of us who will be early adopters of the Xbox 360, that drive to make launch-title Call of Duty 2 the best game possible is proving to be a reality. Walking away from the game and reflecting on everything I felt—the visual blitzkrieg of the horrors of war, the tremendous realism and detail in the settings, the track of the enemies and the deafening sounds of chaos—this is truly a new experience on a console. Certainly there's a level of familiarity within the construct: "The core mechanic—no one fights alone, the intensity, the chaos of battle, the hallmark of Call of Duty—that's all there," Zampella points out. But it's all so densely presented, impacting you in a way that was not possible before. "We're just bringing it all to the next level. We're not just creating the game



that's five feet in front of you. We're creating the world that's all around you. It's not just like, there's three guys in front of you; there's a war going on all around you."

And that expansive battleground is more engaging for a number of reasons, some simply because the team decided they needed to make fundamental improvements over the original Call of Duty. "A number of people thought the first game was just too short, so we really wanted to make sure that [there] was a much bigger game in Call of Duty 2. One of the things we introduced was a nonlinear gameplay mechanic. It's not GTA—go wherever you want,

"We're not just creating the game that's five feet in front of you. We're creating the world that's all around you."

Vince Zampella, chief creative officer,
Infinity Ward

do whatever you want—but you can accomplish objectives out of order, which gives you a lot more freedom of choice and makes it more immersing. The world itself is also just bigger—there's more levels, and they're larger."

One thing that continued to impress me the more I got into Call of Duty 2 was the piercing pop of weapon fire, the explosions, the constant barrage of battlefield noise. "We didn't think there was enough variety of sound in Call of Duty; some of the weapon sounds sort of mushed together. Now every weapon is distinctive; you'll recognize very specific sounds," explains chief technical officer Jason West. "When



In game characters can now approach the detail of the concepts...

Fascinating web of sci-fi action

The attention to detail in regards to the sound of the many authentic weapons was a big concern for the team. Unlike *Call of Duty*, where you may have noticed repeating, generic sounds for certain weapons, the sequel goes to meticulous lengths to ensure your ears will be as involved as your eyes in the intensity of the war experience.



Research, research, research: the team travels to Africa for reference.



we talked to veterans, one of the things they said was the M1 Garand has such a distinct sound. When it empties out, and the clip pops out, there's that ting. That's something that every soldier would listen for, they'd know immediately if you were out of ammo. Sometimes they'd even fake it by bouncing clips off their helmets. Just the little things like that, when you start researching, you really find out how important those things are."

Going beyond the mechanical noises, *Call of Duty 2* is concerned with the battle cries of both allies and the enemy. When you consider the complexity of what's going on and the sheer numbers of human encounters caught in emotions running at near breaking point, imagine the chaos of verbal reaction and communication. "Battle chatter is a big deal. One of the things the military adviser said: first shot's fired, the surprise is gone, communication is the key to survival," explains Zampella. "So we decided, let's take that communication and make it more than meaningless chatter. Let's make it real; let's make it important to the game. So we recorded over 22,000 lines of dialogue. And that doesn't include the main dialogue in the game—that's just battle dialogue. The sound takes up as much space on the disc as the entire first game did."

A lot of the time, the chatter is spontaneous, arising according to the situation at hand. If an enemy's flanking you to the left, a sniper's made his way behind a car or in a second story balcony, your team will shout it out. It brings out the level of intensity of the game, making your squad more invaluable alive. And without them, you're toast. "One of the big things we did with *Call of Duty 2* was give the enemies group behavior AI, make the enemies really move around and pin you down, flank you," begins West. "If you're playing on the appropriate skill level, there are times where you really have to make



authentic choices. You don't move, you're dead. You don't stay with your squad, you're dead. You try and pick people off one shot at a time from the same spot, you're dead."

Beyond all the technical and gameplay achievements in *Call of Duty 2*, the portable concealment is immediately noticeable. "We worked with military advisers, and one of the things they emphasized was the importance of portable concealment. Smoke, things like that, are just integral to battlefield conditions," explains Zampella. "So we incorporated that, and with the nonlinear AI and gameplay, it's more important because people can flank you. So you throw a smoke grenade out onto the field, the AI responds to it. They'll flank you; they won't just run blindly or fire through the smoke."

It's a rush moving through the blinding smoke, seeing the silhouette of the enemy, getting caught completely off guard. The volume of the effect is amazingly disorienting; you're in the fog, not just playing around a backdropped special effect. That "oh my god, this is real" emotion is becoming less of a cliché and more of a reality. Brady Flechter

Call of Duty 2

Xbox 360, PC

Point of Interest

Infinity Ward members were involved in the creation of the original Medal of Honor.

Developer: Infinity Ward Publisher: Activision

Online: TBA Available: November



What would a game centered around World War II be without tanks and trenches?



Q4 QUAKE

Set to rattle the competition on all fronts

A comprehensive hands-on session with several levels of Quake 4's campaign served as a proof of concept, cutting through all the hype with a brand of thrilling action gameplay that, once experienced, has left a genuine hunger for more. One expected concern is the length and depth of the final campaign, but the action itself is looking so good that even a brisk journey might be satisfactory. There's another detail, not nearly as cursory as a general forecasted approval, that we've gleaned from this preview session: the Doom 3 engine, for all its shadowy opulence and normal mapped proficiency, seems to possess a life force of its own. It's a temporary numeric essence manifested and sustained by programmer/shaman John Carmack, but it's becoming clear that this engine has a wholesale identity stamp—like some kind of inimitable graffiti tag—that imprints itself on every surface it births and bedecks. In the same way you can spot the engine robustly depicting the environments of

"The Quake 4 campaign is like entering a familiar comfort zone spread across a vast, unrelenting series of action playgrounds."



Prey, you can see its distinct aura being put to task stirring the world of the Strogg home planet in Quake 4. And where id Software corralled you through Doom 3's miasma of hell-spawned horrors, Raven's designers and artists have harnessed the toolset—its powerful genetics instantly visible in the flesh and chrome of every actor—to drive a wild sci-fi action-movie experience across a biomechanical alien landscape.

The Quake 4 campaign is like entering a familiar comfort zone spread across a vast, unrelenting series of action playgrounds. The game picks up where Quake 2's story left off, after the destruction of the long-range Strogg defense systems. You play as Rhino Squad lieutenant Matthew Kane, the Quake series' first named protagonist and one of hundreds of marines entering Strogg airspace to begin a massive counter-assault. After a crash landing, Matthew regains consciousness and heads for the squad rally point. The engine's lineage is immediately apparent from the first interaction with a nearby squad mate as a minimal and intuitive context-sensitive interface activates almost transparently. Bolstered by re-written AI, Quake 4 takes

the system further as specialist marines scattered throughout the game come prepared to fulfill specific team roles through interaction. Superiors and fellow squad mates will relay dynamic orders and information on the fly as the counterattack proceeds all around you. The voice acting heard thus far during these objective updates is first-rate. Medic units will act as mobile health stations, while techs will add permanent modifications to weapons like machine guns, railguns, nailguns and rocket launchers. Your first shotgun in Quake 4 is a stubborn single-shot reload, but a tech's upgrade later in the game adds a potent—and essential—multi-shot clip. Spotting a tech marine down a hallway is sort of like seeing a promising power-up icon in any shooter; you know that improved firepower awaits.

Like the marine invaders from Earth, the hulking Strogg abominations are very detailed and distinct. The first few encounters with them are staged in striking metallic corridors banded by light and shadow. Their thumping footsteps and fearsome dialect (deep, clicking growls) evoke a wide-eyed impression. Unlike the horror jolt of Doom 3's mindless

minions, the sensory impact of the Strogg is intensified by the notion that they are intelligent creatures with superior technology operating in their native environment. And so it is, not more than a third of the way through the campaign, that Matthew Kane is captured and brutally converted into a Strogg warrior. Near the end of the limb-shearing procedure and just seconds before Matthew's human mind is erased, his squad busts onto the scene to rescue him. You're now stronger and faster. You have access to Strogg weaponry like the Hyperblaster. You can even use their health stations. Crucially, you've also gained access to most of the Strogg security system—allowing the marine force to move deeper. It's time to administer some cyborg justice.

Quake 4's difficulty ramps up at this point and the encounters begin to accrue a summed intensity that goes beyond previous levels. Raven's prowess really begins to shine. They've added vehicle code and large outdoor rendering, and the wide-open action and blasting aboard mechanized walkers feels instinctive, just like it should: a seamless transmission of the play mechanics used in the core perspective of the game. The familiar movement and firing control will be used to take on massive, lumbering octopus walkers that chime in as boss encounters. It must also be noted that Raven is developing the Xbox 360 and PC versions of Quake 4 side-by-side. The X360 version, viewed in lovely 720p, looks stunning. It isn't moving at 60fps yet, but the reality that it can run virtually everything the high end PC version is pushing out—5.1 surround, no compromising of any assets, no cut-up levels or textures—was a sobering reminder of the console's power. Plans are already coded and complete for supporting all the Xbox Live ladders in both the deathmatch and larger-scale vehicle-based multiplayer. All told, our hands-on experience with Quake 4's campaign painted a very encouraging picture. As for the multiplayer...

Mike Griffin

The Strogg robot walker is strong enough to slice open a tank.

Quake 4

Xbox 360, PC

Point of Interest

In 1997's Quake 2, you bring down Strogg leader Makron. Turns out Makron was an expendable model.

Dev: Raven Software/id Software Pub: Activision

Online: Deathmatch, 1-on-1, Team Assault Available: TBA

Multiplayer insight



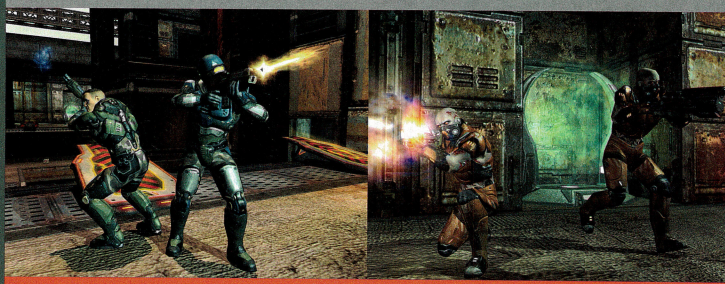
Who better to provide a review of Quake 4's first multiplayer map, "The Fragging Yard," than one of the world's best FPS players, Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel?

play: Now that you've played it, what are your impressions of Quake 4's multiplayer?

Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel: So far, the Quake 4 multiplayer seems to have taken a lot of the feel and speed from Quake 3, and that's good, because Quake 3 was an unbelievable game competitively and professionally. They've added some pretty cool features to Quake 4, giving it a different approach. It's really interesting to see how good it looks in the Doom 3 engine. There's also a one-on-one level they've been showing, very similar to Quake 3 World, and that's what all the gamers on the hardcore scene have been asking for. So I think Raven is definitely delivering on the multiplayer. I look forward to seeing all the other pick-ups and vehicles.

What kind of little things are they getting right with Quake 4's multiplayer engine?

The main thing, I think, is that they're going back to Quake 3's net code, so that'll be a nice improvement. They had too many hit-boxes in the Doom 3 engine—pretty much sensors on every polygon—and it was causing complications with the net code. It wouldn't lag people out or anything like that, but it wasn't as smooth and fast. The Quake 3 net code was superior. They're doing a lot of good things so far. Quake 4 might be a huge leap for the series, and it could be the next big money game too—on a professional level.



Ty

the Tasmanian Tiger

Night of the Quinkan

Krome's feisty marsupial gets a night to remember

The Aussie artisans at Krome Studios have been plugging away at their outback-platforming juggernaut now for the better part of six years, and Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 3: Night of the Quinkan is certainly evidence they should keep right on going onto next-generation consoles. This is a value title that, quality-wise, defies the moniker, making it that rare game that is both top-quality and a bargain at the same time...at launch. Where the first Ty (which sold upwards of a million copies) was a wide-open yet linear affair and Ty 2 perhaps overly vast, Ty 3 is the culmination of the two: a wide-open, branching, world-type platformer...not too big and not at all linear, except when it needs to be.

It is also full of invention, in the form

of amazing conveyances (I especially like piloting the all-terrain Crabmersible) and the next level of 'rang technology, in which 'rang chassis can be fitted with a variety of power stones to elicit different variations on the already specialized weapon. The other big switch comes by way of a darker tone: The easily doused frill lizards of Tys gone by (now with zombie juice) are joined by the Quinkan—a shadowy race that Ty accidentally unleashes on Baramudgee after expel-

ling them from "The Dreaming"—which require additional technique to kill and come in several dangerous flavors, adding an air of real combat that the previous games were lacking. At the outset, Ty's been six months in a wormhole and, upon his return, finds Bush Rescue in a shambles, Dennis, of all amphibians, at General, and his bird buddy Murray nowhere to be found. Lots of work to be done...and then there's the Quinkan... Dove Holverson

Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 3: Night of the Quinkan

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Point of Interest

Krome Studios began when an industry veteran and surfing photographer joined forces in 1999, and has grown from five people to Australia's largest game developer.

Developer: Krome Studios Publisher: Activision

Online: None Available: October

Interview Steve Stamatiadis, creative director/co-founder, Krome Studios

play: Where does Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 3: Night of the Quinkan fall in relation to the wide-open linearity of the original and the perhaps overly vast world of Ty 2?

Steve Stamatiadis: I'd rate it somewhere in between. When we started designing NotQ, we looked at the best bits from the first and second games and combined them into a third, more powerful and larger game. While we loved the vehicle stuff in Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 2: Bush Rescue, we felt we lost a little too much of the platforming essence. So what we did with NotQ is create an even bigger game and brought back more running and jumping in the overworld area.

Amen to that. Things have gotten a bit darker in Ty's world with the dawn of the Quinkan and legions of possessed reptilians; things still family-friendly in Ty town?

This year's game is definitely more noticeably darker and spooky. The direction was something we felt was a natural path to take because that worked best for the storyline. Unlike other games that have "aged up," we've stayed true to the spirit of Ty since we didn't want to alienate our younger gamers. We've always been proud of Ty's family-friendly status and we work hard to keep it that way. That said, I also don't think that kids' entertainment has to be dumbed-down and sugarcoated. Kids these days are definitely a lot more savvy and skilled at many things, including video games, so we acknowledge that and keep things exciting for them. Personally, I know as a kid I loved stories of monsters, aliens and ghosts because they were scary, and I don't think kids are any different today.

Heck, I like them as an adult. Do the Quinkan evolve quite a bit throughout the game?

Indeed they do. They start off pretty easy and ramp up in difficulty and abilities as you progress. So you go from the dog-like Protoquin, Uberquin and Magmaquin all the way up to the Quinking. They get quite a bit nastier as you go, and you can see how they adapt to their environment. It's been great fun to create an enemy based on a mythical creature. Since we aren't dealing with a real creature, per se, we've had the opportunity to get really creative and have some fun with what the Quinkan can do in the game.

As with the first two Ty titles, you're pushing the envelope in terms of seamless open spaces. Would you say that you've wrung all of the power out of the PS2 in this regard?

As far as current games go, I'd say we've pretty much tapped into all the power. Then again, there's so much we've learnt about the hardware doing three Ty the Tasmanian Tiger games that if we started again from scratch now, I'm sure we could easily push the machine to do even *more*. It's just a matter of getting creative and finding tricks that work for you, which we've been known to do.

The Didgeridoo is one awesome Aussie instrument. Will you be using it more

in conjunction with a more ominous soundtrack, or are we in store for more twangy outback-type stuff?

There's a bigger range of music in Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 3: Night of the Quinkan. Obviously there's some spookier-sounding stuff and some more dramatic orchestral pieces too.

I'm really loving the soundtrack. Best of the three in my opinion. The Bunyip is back—and better than ever, I might add—along with the Gunyip, Crabmersible and I'm sure more. I take it vehicles are a major emphasis...

The vehicles are great in the game, but this time around we've paid a lot more attention to making them fit into the platforming side of the game. For instance, the control schemes of the vehicles match Ty's standard controls as much as possible. The Crabmersible plays like a mix of the Bull level from the first game and normal Ty platforming...with missiles. Even with all the vehicle stuff, we actually put more emphasis on the on-foot side of the game, because that's the core gameplay we love and feel is the essence of the Ty the Tasmanian Tiger games.

Indeed. What about the gameplay overall? Are we in for more driving to

"...what we did with NotQ is create an even bigger game and brought back more running and jumping in the overworld area."

Steve Stamatiadis, creative director/co-founder, Krome Studios

locales to complete laundry lists like delivering sandwiches (please say no), or is Ty 3 more about the platforming and 'rang-tossing that made the original so alluring?

I have to say, for me, some of those sillier missions are part of the charm of the Ty the Tasmanian Tiger series. I always like to have some bits in the game like that. A game about an extinct marsupial running around in shorts shouldn't take itself too seriously. But OK, yes, there are no sandwich missions in NotQ. "Ranging and platforming" is the order of the day in NotQ. We took about a quarter of the overworld and made that on-foot action so it plays like a normal level instead of a sandwich run. On top of that, the Crabmersible controls like a Bunyip, not a truck. The Crab' can turn on a dime, jump, flip, swim (on and underwater), attack with its pincers and fire missiles. I guess that basically makes it a whole other playable character. Then if you look at Ty's new combat moves, it totally turbo-charges the normal platforming gameplay. I haven't even started on how much fun I have just messing around with all the different 'rang possibilities you get with the 'rang customization.

You throwing down any mad tricks on Xbox?

Is the Xbox version having double the frame rate of the other versions good enough? It runs at 60 fps, which makes it look and feel really smooth and fast! I guess the fact that it's also drawing more than the other versions is another plus.

Ty is obviously a mighty player in the critter scheme of things; are a cartoon and merchandise still in store? What about a 360 or PS3 sequel? Now that would be something to see. Ty and friends sure would look great with realistic fur and scales!!

The cartoon is progressing along nicely. Film Roman was experimenting with some other looks for Ty and the gang, but in the end, we decided to keep it a lot closer to the look of the game. The current stuff is looking just awesome—and I'm the hardest guy to please when it comes to Ty art. If there are any toy companies out there

interested in doing a line of marsupials in mechs, please call me. I've been dying to have a toy Shadow Bunyip on my desk for years!

A next-gen Ty the Tasmanian Tiger? You bet, though I can't officially comment on when that'll happen, but stay tuned! Though I'm pretty sure Ty works better when it looks less realistic. I'd like to play with the tech to give the world of Ty a more interesting and distinctive graphic look. For me, next-gen is going to be about the power to give games more of a unique look, and besides, Xbox and GameCube can already do fur and normal maps—we're planning on finding new tricks that haven't been done.

Touché. You guys are leading the way in Aussie game development. How would you say living in Australia affects your end product? Is there more sense of fun, adventure and innocence compared to the uptight nature of things over here?

It's been an exciting journey for us, and we are really proud of our position both in Australia and on a global scale. I credit our success to the people that make up the company—Krome is staffed with some of the best talent in the industry. But more importantly, it's the hard work, passion and dedication of everyone here that has gotten us to where we are today. I love my job and I love coming into work with the team every day. Living in Australia has a huge positive effect on the Ty the Tasmanian Tiger products. It helps that these games are Australian-themed, which isn't a coincidence, of course. [grin] When we make a game like the Ty the Tasmanian Tiger series, it's really us making a game about us. As for Australia in general, it's a very laid-back culture, and we do have fun working on our projects. But we're also good at rolling our sleeves up and getting the job done when we need to, which has helped us maintain a solid reputation of being a developer that stays on-time and on-budget with its projects.

Why is Ty 3 a "value" title? Does this affect the development process via budget, etc.?

We worked with EA on our two previous titles. It was great to have an opportunity



Ty takes on a Quinkan overlord in the Bunyip.

to work with them, and we credit them with helping to establish the franchise. For this year's game, we've partnered up with Activision on the third installment. Similar to our EA deal, we are co-publishing partners with Activision since we want to make sure we are more involved and have control over things, as it's our IP and definitely one that we are very committed to. The deal is through the Activision value side, which is known for delivering games that are more affordable and mass-oriented. Ty the Tasmanian Tiger games are high-quality titles; this year is no exception to that rule, so we view this as an opportunity to once again provide a fantastic game at an affordable price.

In terms of the development process, it's been pretty much on track. NotQ was actually in development toward the later part of the second game—before we signed with Activision—so we were on parallel development tracks with two Ty the Tasmanian Tiger games. We knew we were going to make a third title, so having that "extra" time was extremely helpful, as it would be nearly impossible to create an entirely new game in less than a year.

Krome has always partially funded the Ty the Tasmanian Tiger games. Reason being is to make the best games we can; basically, it's a testament to just how much we believe in the IP. Moreover, we've taken the smart route on making this product—building upon a lot of the technology and assets from previous Ty the Tasmanian Tiger titles to make this game. Having done two games, we had a good idea of where the problems would be and what to avoid.

Can I come live with you?

Sure, but you have to like nice weather, having fun and playing games. Oh and Vegemite; you have to like Vegemite, otherwise they don't let you in the country—hey, I don't make the rules. **play**





Far Cry Instincts

Xbox

While this is not a carbon-copy of the acclaimed PC first-person shooter Far Cry, the template is there for a similar experience on Xbox. The setting is unique, taking place in a jungle wilderness, where mercenaries have set up shop for you to dismantle. The levels are wide open, offering you freedom of choice and exploration. Without giving away too much story detail, you play as a not-quite-human Jack Carver, developing animal-like skills of enhanced smell and sight as you progress through the game.

Brady Fiechter

Dev: Ubisoft Montreal Pub: Ubisoft Available: October



Castlevania: Curse of Darkness

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Ever since its announcement, Castlevania: Curse of Darkness has been looking good, but now that the game is almost finished, it's showing off some potential to become something really special. One of the coolest new revelations: the evolution of the Innocent Devil ally characters, which actually transform into new beasts as crystals are collected; there are even multiple evolutionary paths to take, granting the Innocent Devils different abilities or stat boosts depending on their form. The interconnected castle grounds are massive, and protagonist Hector has plenty of neat tricks up his sleeve, like stealing items from enemies, bosses included. **Chris Hoffman**

Dev: Konami Pub: Konami Available: November



Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit

PlayStation 2, Xbox

If crazed Were-Rabbits were terrorizing your town at night, you'd want a wacky inventor and his dog to save you...right? *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* is due in theatres October 7, and Frontier has put together a pleasant, funny and entertaining game to accompany the claymation flick. They've implemented a two-player co-op mode that's actually cooperative (using a simple but effective partner system), and single-player mode also flows smoothly. The VO, sound effects and animation also add quite a bit to the game's overall atmosphere. Charge up your Bun-Guns! **Ashley Esqueda**

Dev: Frontier Developments Pub: Konami Available: September

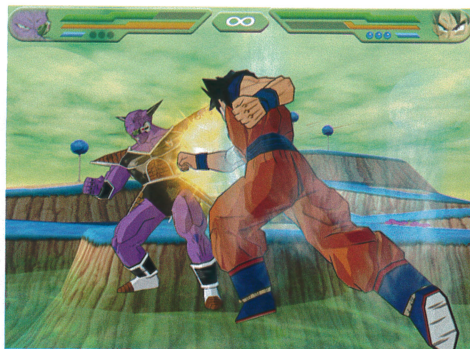


Crime Life: Gang Wars

Xbox, PC

In case the full-screen parental advisory for explicit content at the beginning of *Crime Life: Gang Wars* doesn't instantly solidify its street cred, then maybe its grimy ghetto setting, hip-hop music or clichéd gangsta dialogue will. No? How about the fact that the members of rap group D12 all play parts in the game? After all, rappers always make a game better. OK, so the fighting is still a bit sloppy at this point, the moves look kinda weak and the models and textures aren't quite up to snuff, but who needs all that when you're living a life of crime? **Chris Hoffman**

Dev: Hothouse Creations Pub: Konami Avail: October Online: Live Aware



Dragon Ball Z: Budokai

PlayStation 2

Apparently DBZ fans simply cannot get enough DBZ fighting. I suppose the allure is more story-driven than anything else, because with so many first-rate fighting games on the market, the only reason to buy a fourth DBZ game would be rabid fandom...or would it? In this case (finally), maybe not. I'll say this about Tenkaichi: this is by far the best the series has rendered. The secret is in the ostentatious presentation (series-indicative wit runs rampant) and the vastness of the environments, allowing the freedom of movement and tactics these characters thrive on as well as destructible objects that often wield tide-turning power-ups. There's also a reported 60 characters in here and enough unlockables to keep busy until the next game (12 months and counting) arrives.

Dave Halverson

Dev: Spike Pub: Atari Available: October

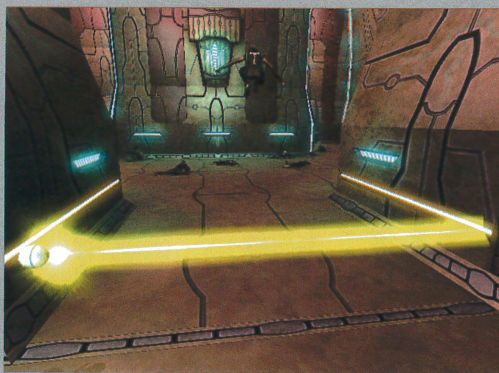


TMNT 3: Mutant Nightmare

PlayStation 2, Xbox,

On the plus side, the developers have taken some steps to correct the last installment's shortcomings, like giving the turtles separate life bars and providing vehicle stages that are actually kinda fun. They're also putting in new features, like the ability to transform your turtle into a more powerful Ultimate Turtle form, as well as playing the retro card again with the inclusion of the arcade version of TMNT: Turtles in Time (albeit without the original music). The basic beat-'em-up gameplay, however, is still feeling a bit stiff; we can only hope it improves before release. **Chris Hoffman**

Dev: Konami Pub: Konami Available: November



Aeon Flux

PlayStation 2, Xbox

It's a shame—a tragedy even—that Aeon Flux is finally getting its mainstream comeuppance by way of a film and game that, no matter how good, don't resemble what made it so extraordinary as an animated series: the uncanny art style of Peter Chung. What should be a big-budget CGI film will instead likely be Hollywood schlock, but at least the game seems to be on the right track. If it's a straightforward battle-action hybrid you crave starring a shapely vixen to die for, more acrobatics than a Chinese circus and mucho Samus ball, well, you've come to the right place. AF features the remarkable BloodRayne (Infernal) engine in smoking form, but with it, the anti-dynamic character integration that will forever plague it. There's still time... **Dave Halverson**

Dev: Terminal Reality Pub: Majesco Available: November



Rampage: Total Destruction

PlayStation 2, GameCube

Weighing in at a trim \$19.95, George, Lizzie, Ralph and some new friends have finally worked up an appetite for some 3D cuisine. Offering new takes on the beloved arcade formula, such as hilarious new cause-and-effect mass destruction, new power-ups, upgrades and monster-specific supers and combos, Total Destruction seems the perfect retro franchise to see a current-gen overhaul, especially on PS2 and GameCube, where we're likely to see an '06 lull as Sony and Nintendo continue loading their next-gen guns. For the uninitiated, Rampage is the definition of arcade fun, riding on the simple premise of eating people and destroying their cities and urban sprawls before the surging militia roasts your monster ass. **Dave Halverson**

Dev: Pipeworks Pub: Midway Available: Spring 2006



Knights of the Temple 2

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Oh ye of beautiful visuals and sea-deep gameplay, why must you tempt me so? TDK Mediactive laid enough turds to fertilize the Sahara then seemingly vanished, only to return with what seems to be their most promising game yet. Dark and Gothic, Knights of the Temple 2 conveys a fitting air of dread in league with the grisly storyline, as our pail-headed hero attempts to close the gates of hell—which twisted his sweetie into a blue-skinned devil and continues to plague the world—by collecting three artifacts: the eye to see the way, the weapon to deliver him to hell's gate, and the key to seal it shut forever. Lose the load times on Xbox and we may have a winner. **Dave Halverson**

Dev: Cauldron Pub: Play Logic/TDK Mediactive Available: TBA



Blitz: The League

PlayStation 2, Xbox

For Midway, EA buying the official NFL license was a blessing in disguise. Now the creators of the famed NFL Blitz series can make the game they've always wanted. The story mode in Blitz: The League is going to have it all—shady owners, corrupt players, whores and, of course, excessive steroid use. The action on the playing field has been overhauled as well; dirty hits, high-impact clashes and Unleash Moves make the gameplay uniquely its own. Throw in a good handful of expletives and some solid online gameplay and you have a football game that is going to give Madden a run for its money. **Tom Ham**

Dev: Midway Games Pub: Midway Games Available: October



NBA Live 06

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

The big innovation in NBA Live '06 is Freestyle Superstars, a special set of controls for top-tier NBA players. The idea behind this is to allow superstar players to stand out from everyone else. Instead of Shaq dominating the inside with his dunks, you can utilize his Freestyle Superstar moves to really dominate and own everyone. Whether it's passing, shooting, defending or dunking, there are specific moves and controls for each superstar. However, after trying out some new moves, I found them to be overpowering and at times unstoppable—hardly fair. I'm hoping they fix this in time for the game's ship date. **Tom Ham**

Dev: EA Canada Pub: Electronic Arts Available: September

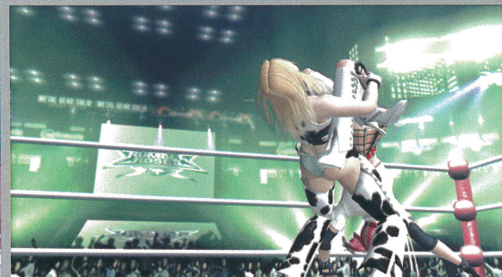


Rumble Roses XX

Xbox 360

The all-female wrestling action of Rumble Roses always seemed better suited to Xbox than PS2, and now Konami apparently agrees, as they're delivering the stunning sequel on 360. Alongside singles bouts, you can now go for a foursome in Rumble Roses XX with tag team matches, Battle Royals and Elimination Matches, and you can even take it all online. Twenty characters will be stepping into the ring this time out, including all the ladies from the original, and they'll again feature both face and heel personas. Konami also promises a greatly expanded arsenal of hard-hitting moves. **Chris Hoffman**

Dev: Yuke's Pub: Konami Available: TBA Online: 4p co-op/versus



Suikoden Tactics PlayStation 2

Known as Rhapsodia in Japan, Suikoden Tactics is a strategy-RPG that explores the events and backstory surrounding Suikoden IV. Though the grid-based gameplay is familiar, a deep elemental affinity system should satisfy even strategy veterans. Players and enemies can alter the elemental properties of the battlefield, boosting the stats of characters of that affinity while harming characters of the opposing disposition; it's often critical to success in battle. Suikoden fans may be disappointed by the lack of the usual 108 characters, but at least you can upload your Suikoden IV save data. **Chris Hoffman**

Dev: Konami Pub: Konami Available: November Online: None



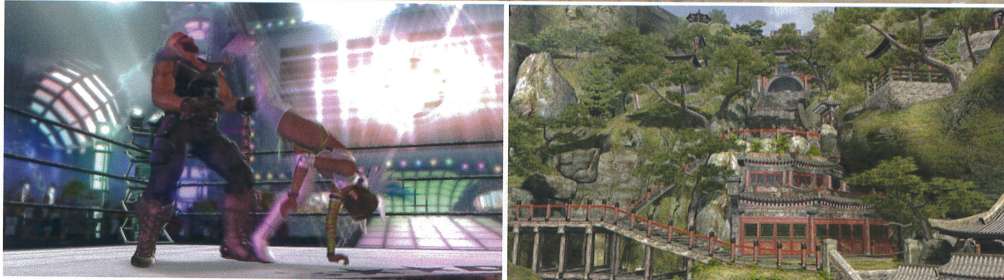
Driver: Parallel Lines

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

After the car wreck that was DRIV3R, Reflections is looking to get back to its roots with Driver: Parallel Lines. Taking place in New York City, the franchise aims to return to its core of heart-pounding chases while implementing mini-games, a better physics and damage engine and eight-player online play. It appears we'll still have to control the main character outside his vehicle (hopefully not too much), but judging from what we've seen so far, it looks like Driver: PL is going to shift into sixth gear in 2006. **Ashley Esqueda**

Dev: Reflections Interactive Pub: Atari Available: Q1 2006 Online: 8p versus





Dead or Alive 4

Xbox 360

While Dead or Alive 4 is still more mystery than tangible game, you pretty much know what you're going to get once this true sequel hits the Xbox 360: fighting at its best. The teaser at E3 showcased the visual prowess, revealing a style and form true to the series while bumping up the effects and size of the arenas to take advantage of the new hardware; the latest images look that much more impressive, with crazy lighting and color bringing the DOA characters to incredibly vivid life. The fighting system is supposedly being rearranged a bit, but to what effect is still up in the air. **Brady Fiechter**

Dev: Team Ninja Pub: Tecmo Available: Fall

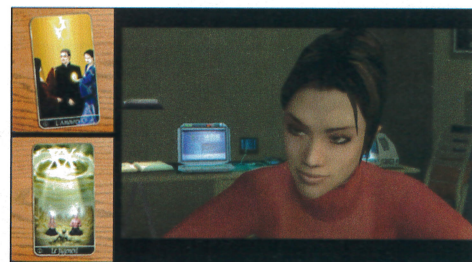


Chicken Little

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Put your fear of controlling tiny, talking bifocal chickens on hold and bask in the platforming glory of Chicken Little...no kidding. While it currently contains a mini-game of baseball so frustrating I'd like to deep fry it, everything else here is pure family gold thanks to BVI's wise choice of soliciting über-developer Avalanche to do the honors. Admittedly, this game is right on the line for even me, the last professed platforming addict in print media, due to a lead character seemingly designed for newborns, but the engine and certain elements of the gameplay are hard to resist. A word to the producer though: beat-based mini-games are one thing, but if you're going to make them borderline impossible, then install a back door to the game. If you're still tweaking, I'll take that back later. **Dave Halverson**

Dev: Avalanche Software Pub: Buena Vista Interactive Available: October



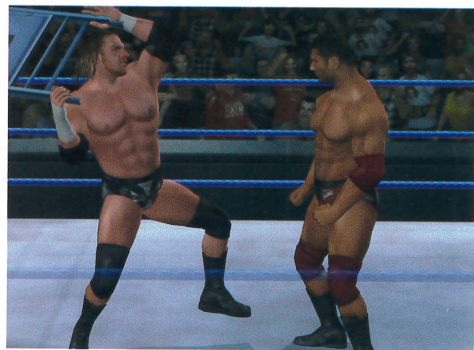
Indigo Prophecy

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Set in the heart of New York, Indigo Prophecy puts you in the role of Lucas Kane, who, in the opening sequence of the game, is seen murdering an ostensibly random stranger on a bathroom floor. Throughout the city, seemingly sane people are involved in horrific murders that are connected in some ritualistic manner. As a context-sensitive game of exploration and story discovery, Indigo Prophecy has you searching for the reason behind your descent into madness.

Brady Fiechter

Dev: Atari Pub: Atari Available: October



WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006

PlayStation 2

Thanks to additions like new grapples, authentic WWE titles than can be defended in exhibition matches, a stamina system (which can be turned off if you prefer) and a momentum meter that opens up new gameplay possibilities like playing possum and rolling up your opponent for a surprise victory, the newest SmackDown! should be the deepest yet. New modes have also been added: Buried Alive matches, Backstage Brawls featuring tons of detailed interactive elements, and the fetishistic Fulfill Your Fantasy match, where the Divas battle as French maids, schoolgirls or nurses. Expect more than 60 characters, including new legends. **Chris Hoffman**

Dev: Yuke's Pub: THQ Available: November Online: 4p versus/co-op

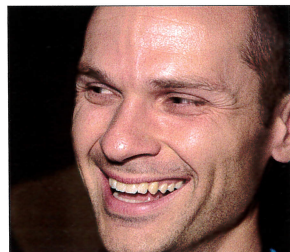
Bio hazard



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D
Now playing: Castlevania: Curse of Darkness & Dawn of Sorrow, Battalion Wars
Favorite Ending: Jak 3



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

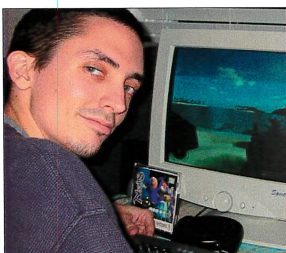
Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Mario Superstar Baseball
Favorite Ending: Final Fantasy IX



Chris Hoffman
Senior Editor

After being with the Play crew since their Gamers' Republic days (except for a stint on the publishing side of things), Chris' love of the GBA and DS has finally driven him directly into the arms of the makers of such things, where he will continue to support wrestling games, Mega Man and pretty much anything 2D. Squirrel army status: disbanded for lewd conduct.

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney
Favorite Ending: Final Fantasy VIII



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: F.E.A.R.
Favorite Ending: Phantasy Star II



Ashley "Veela" Esqueda
Associate Editor

To Ashley, video games are like magnificent pieces of art: you don't break down the piece as a whole to comment on the brush stroke method or colors used. She thanks her mother for playing Castlevania II after school, and everyone in elementary school for shunning her, because without them, her obsession with gaming would not have been possible.

Favorite genres: Action, RPGs, adventure, first-person shooters, MMORPGs
Now playing: Nintendogs
Favorite Ending: Final Fantasy X



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

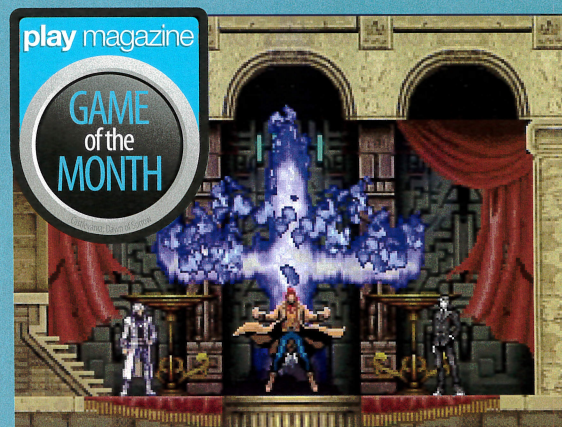
A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMORPGs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangaio.

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Mario Superstar Baseball
Favorite Ending: Klonoa

Reviews

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Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow

071

Just as hero Soma Cruz takes his enemies' souls, so will this game take yours, as you'll be instantly under the spell of the intricate visuals, transfixing gameplay and unique DS features.

Rating System

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game isn't just the very best—it's the best of the best.

- 10...Perfect
- 9...Extraordinary
- 8...Great
- 7...Good
- 6...Decent
- 5...Average
- 4...Below average
- 3...Poor
- 2...Bad
- 1...Terrible

MARVEL NEMESIS

Rise of the Imperfects

Presently imperfect

What are a few imperfections among friends? Yes, Electronic Arts has taken a few liberties with the beloved Marvel Comics characters: The orange rock-covered Thing now has ears and the female assassin Elektra is strong enough to rip a parking meter from its concrete foundations. No big deal.

Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects presents a dark New York, one overrun by invaders and a collection of Marvel- and Electronic Arts-created heroes to combat it. The game plays as a rather straightforward 3D brawler, with enemies materializing in a green haze and fairly begging to be dispatched with prejudice. Missions are kept brief and usually require no more than five minutes to complete. Imperfects is nothing if not to the point.

A barebones story, told via cutscenes, holds things together. Individual stages, however, are just strung along one after another with little to anchor them together. The game seemingly throws these characters

into missions without context, and the result is disjointed. Without knowing, say, Wolverine has recently become a member of the super-team Avengers, it might seem odd the game takes the feral X-Man on a series of missions in Avengers' Mansion.

As for the fighting, well, it goes down fairly smoothly. The controls are not customizable, but the setup is utilitarian enough that no one will be able to mess things up. Items can be picked up and hurled with great force, special attacks can be performed by holding down the "Super Powers" button, and most objects in the environment (save, of course, for wooden doors and the like) can be destroyed. It's competently done, and enemies are plentiful enough to provide an adequate challenge. Unlockable cards and comics with full voice-overs passably serve as rewards, and when the story mode loses its luster, both online play and a fine head-to-head mode provide suitable entertainment.

Sadly, the game is only remarkable for the gritty, edgy environments it



presents. The darkened streets of New York are littered with wrecked cars, flaming ruins, shattered rubble. The deserted Avengers' Mansion flickers dimly, and suits of armor stand to bear witness that something malicious laid waste to the place. An excellent mood is set and the character designs by popular comic artist Jae Lee complete the very pretty picture. The rest is well done, but certainly not anything beyond that. It's definitely a gas to tear through the villainous Imperfects as Venom, Iron Man and The Thing, but the mileage is certainly limited. Greg Orlando



Wolverine's still pissed he paid to see Elektra's crappy film.



"...a rather straightforward 3D brawler, with enemies materializing in a green haze and fairly begging to be dispatched with prejudice."

Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects		7.0
PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube		Score
<p>Great selection of heroes; excellent character designs and environments.</p> <p>Minus: No customizable controls. Uninspired.</p>		
<p>Developer: Electronic Arts/Nihilistic Publisher: Electronic Arts Online: 2p versus Available: September</p>		

Ninja Gaiden Black

Itagaki's incomparable action game gets even better



It wasn't as much of a throw as it was a savage whiplash against the blunt edge of my table, cord in my hand as I swung the S-controller to its shattered destruction. It felt pretty good actually. Alma was not making me happy, so I really had no choice but to get violent. Those black ninjas and their stupid exploding shuriken are really good at pissing me off too, and I wasn't so pleased with those tank battles or the soldiers who fire off rockets that are really good at blowing up right in my face at the most inopportune moments.

I haven't gotten this angry at a game since back in the 16-bit days, when a severe difficulty level wasn't so uncommon and flying controllers were all part of the fun. I'm soft, no doubt,

and playing this uncompromising game was like a workout after years away from the gym. It hurts. I absolutely love it.

Ninja Gaiden Black does not cheat, and when you stumble, it's routinely your own fault for not flawlessly nailing the technique behind the game. There are moments when you just can't quite figure out why you're continually getting beaten down, then it clicks: you pull off every move with grace and precision, exploiting the enemy to perfect form, and you light up with that feeling of supreme accomplishment. It's not a feeling every gamer wants or can understand, but when you nail it, it's an awesome reward.

As an expansion pack of sorts, Ninja Gaiden Black is the core game



"...you pull off every move with grace and precision, exploiting the enemy to perfect form, and you light up with that feeling of supreme accomplishment."





we experienced nearly two years ago on Xbox, augmented with a host of peripheral extras. One of the more notable additions is the addressing of the difficulty level. If you die three times inside the boundary of the last checkpoint, you're offered the choice to receive enhanced powers, but not without a price. Affixed to Ryu's wrist is a flowing ribbon, branding him as a failure in the arts of a true ninja. Your path may be

easier, but humiliation is along for the ride.

Beyond the features that were included in the downloadable Hurricane Packs, Ninja Gaiden Black throws in a few new costumes and minor embellishments like vocal narration from Ayame, which I could have done without. A manual camera is also an option for anyone who felt restricted by the rigid framing of before; I found no use for it in battle and often

Old School

In addition to the NES Ninja Gaiden games that were hidden in the original Xbox Ninja Gaiden, Black also includes the arcade version of Ryu's adventures—coming home for the first time since the Atari Lynx and Japanese Mega Drive versions. The beat-'em-up gameplay is quite a bit different from the Gaiden action most fans are used to, but one thing that hasn't changed is the unforgiving challenge. Look for Gaiden to open up after you conquer Black on any difficulty level.



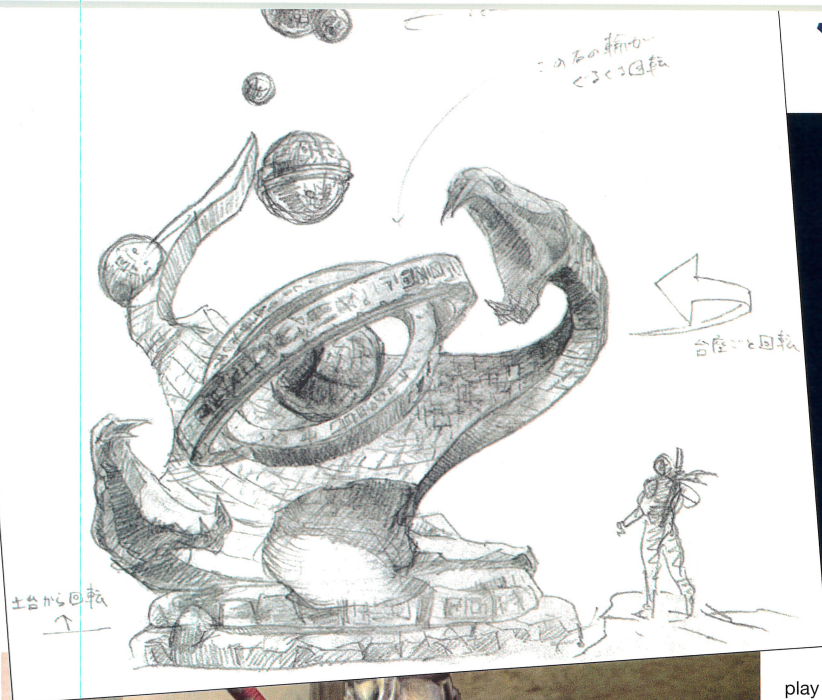
prefer fixed perspective, but most people will enjoy the new freedom.

The most robust inclusion to the game lies in the 50 side missions, which mostly comprise arena battles and boss challenges, with some new enemies scattered about. The hardest of the hardcore will relish these additional nightmares of difficulty and new angles of play, but after a while I began to lose interest. I appreciate the challenge in the main game, but here, without enough incentive driving me forward, it became a chore.

As a game clearly designed for veteran gamers who have a history with the series, Ninja Gaiden Black's offering of Ninja Gaiden Arcade is a huge incentive to fork over the \$29.99 asking price. Released in 1988, the coin-op was an impressively conceived action game for its time, every bit as difficult and fun as the games that would follow in the series. It's two-player as well, which makes it all the more fun to take the trip down memory lane. If you're like me, it's been more than a decade since revisiting, and just seeing the opening animation alone was a cheap thrill. You may laugh at how primitive the game feels by today's standards, but there's something special there that will keep you grinding forward to the end.

Now that I've had the opportunity to





play *Ninja Gaiden* for the second time, I've come away respecting the game more than I did before. I was especially struck by how ambitious the game is, the scope of the design and unique depth of combat that's never been attempted before in such an enormous setting. Director Tomonobu Itagaki has been honing his sensibilities in *Dead or Alive*, and it's fascinating to see the influences passed on to an action-adventure setting. There's an intriguing eccentricity to the presentation, a work of artists who exist in their own bizarre, exuberant world. More than an accomplished game of harshly technical hack and slash, *Ninja Gaiden Black* is a chance to sink into Japanese visions of an entirely unique order. This is not a game I

would want every month, but it is arguably without peer, the ultimate game for the audience open to its madness. Brady Fletcher

Ninja Gaiden Black

Xbox

9.5

Score

Stunning, intense, uncompromising, peerless.

May be too difficult for most. That story needs some work.

Developer: Team Ninja Publisher: Tecmo
Online: Score rankings Available: September



"The hardest of the hardcore will relish these additional nightmares of difficulty..."

Mario Superstar Baseball

Royal rumble

Disappointed is perhaps too strong a word to use when describing my feeling towards Mario Tennis when it was released last year for GameCube. Perhaps it's more accurate to say it wasn't exactly what I wanted. Of course it controlled beautifully and the look and feel of the game was perfect, but I did not like the bevy of super hits unleashed every match. To me, tennis is an active enough game not to need all the artificial excitement. Console baseball on the other hand could use a dose of craziness I think, and in Mario Superstar Baseball, I found the exaggerated formula to be spot-on.

The expected cast of Mario stars is on hand here, and you can choose your favorite to be Team Captain. They all exhibit different strengths and weaknesses of course, but also unique Star moves which I'll discuss later. In addition to the big names like

Donkey Kong and Luigi, you'll also find more generic characters like Koopas and citizens of Mario Sunshine's Delphino Island to help fill out the teams.

You can choose to use a randomly generated team line-up, but it's better to do it yourself. There is a simple strategy to employ when making your team. Certain teammates will exhibit special behavior when paired with another (indicated on-screen by a musical note). This applies during fielding and offense. For instance, it's a good idea to have an outfielder and catcher linked to get a wicked fast throw to home plate. When batting, if a linked member is already on base, you're more likely to get a hit. Simple and fun.

Added to this is the concept of earning stars, which can be used to unleash special pitches or hits which can be difficult (but not impossible) to react to. Chances to earn stars come up throughout the game and you do so by either getting a hit when batting or scoring an out when pitching. These stars turn out to be quite crucial at times and can easily turn the tide of a game, so you definitely want to save them for the best moments and do your best to earn them when they come up. Again, simple and fun.

Typical of a Mario sports title, there are multiplayer mini games to get into, as well as a fairly fleshed-out one-player game which finds you traveling around and earning new players. In other words, there is plenty to do here for one or more players, and anyone can enjoy this fun and exciting baseball game. Michael Hobbs



"Stars turn out to be quite crucial at times and can easily turn the tide of a game, so you definitely want to save them for the best moments..."



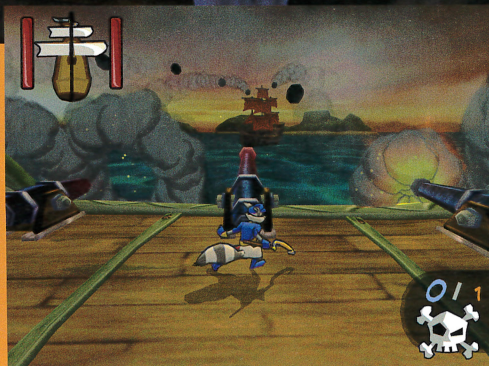
Mario Superstar Baseball		8.5
GameCube		Score
<p>Great, simple and fun gameplay that also has enough strategy to last more than few evenings. Bright and wonderful look.</p>		
<p>Fielding feels a little too automatic at times.</p>		
<p>Developer: Namco Publisher: Nintendo</p>		
<p>Online: None Available: August</p>		



Sly 3

Honor Among Thieves

Band of the hand...paws, stumps, claws...



It's a pirate's life for Sly!
Talk about cannon fodder...

Why would anyone take on a third caper with Sly and the gang? I mean, we've all been there and done a whole lot of that, right? Er, no. Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves is the very embodiment of what a sequel should be—so good, in fact, that “sequel” is the wrong term altogether. Like a great episode of your favorite sitcom or film franchise, it's more a continuation, building on everything fans love, with all of the savvy that working on a project for a console's lifespan (and hopefully beyond) embodies. This is a dream team in full creative swing, having a great time with characters they love, and it comes through the controller in every piece of this most audacious caper as Sly, Bentley and eventually Murray do their own version of *Ocean's Eleven* to steal back the Cooper family trust.

What we have here is an elaborate, mission-based interactive cartoon where the player pulls the strings, and what lovely and diverse strings they are... If you thought Sly and company were busy before, think again. Bentley's wheelchair must come with a caffeine drip because he's a turtle on the edge. Besides his own mission antics—hacking mainframes, finding clues, cracking safes and busting out crazy wheelchair maneuvers—his means-to-an-end scheming has hit critical mass, which, in the gamescape, equates to an unending throng of play mechanics, gadgets and play-styles that build steadily

as the story evolves. The first half of the game (and change) is spent assembling the team while dealing with a colorful cast of villains, from crazed opera singers to Yosemite Sam's airborne alter ego, while avoiding Carmelita Fox, who plays a huge (literally) role as Sly and company bolster their numbers. First up is Murray, who chose the path of righteousness after being riddled with guilt over Bentley's injuries, followed by his waddling near-naked purple guru who looks like a cross between a Tasmanian devil and Keith Richards (he's too cool for words and adds possession and bad guy riding to the mix), then the lovely RC specialist Penelope, the always colorful Dimitri and even one of the original five leches responsible for Sly becoming an orphan in the first place... deep stuff for a critter yarn.

“This is the critter mélange pièce de résistance: an immense action ride that embodies all that is good and fun about video games.”

With teamwork comes invention—impeccably produced and polished invention that keeps the gameplay fresh for the duration. Lock-on shooting, beat-based battles, lock-picking, secret code deciphering, climbing, dog fighting, possession, paragliding, riding, rowing, retro shooting, bar room brawling, demolitions, bouncing and all manner of action are plugged deftly into the mix, broken up by some of the best voice work and cinematics you'll find anywhere. The Sly engine is now firing on 12 cylinders, tossing around huge landscapes with ease from dusk 'til dawn as the game-time weather envelops us in the magic of each passing environment. This is the critter mélange pièce de résistance: an immense action ride that embodies all that is good and fun about video games. With each geographical location, indigenous touches, effects and wonderful exaggeration follow. Italy, the Australian outback, Holland, China, a pirate world to die for and beyond all offer distinctly different

Bentley just makes me happy. I'm sorry he's all busted up but I do love controlling that wheelchair.



paths to the prize...and then there's the 3D glasses. When they prompt you as to whether or not you want to use them, that's a big affirmative. I now demand this in every platformer I play. The depth afforded by wearing the glasses, especially in a dark room, is uncanny. The dog fighting is especially extraordinary as planes streak behind and in front of Sly. It also helps if you have a big flatty and composite cables, so if you've been waffling about upgrading, let Sly 3 be your final nudge.

Two things I'll mention that could be better: Penelope's RC chopper grappling hook is tricky to judge, and on a personal note, I find Carmelita as a love interest wanting. Sly deserves better. Something more along the lines of Crystal from Star

Fox Adventures or Sonic Heroes' Rouge the Bat would be more appropriate. I suppose caring about the latter puts me in a category ripe for shock therapy, but I'm having too much fun being odd to go back now. If you too like your fun, well... fun, Bentley starts recruiting September 27.

Dave Halverson

Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves

PlayStation 2

9.5

Score

Immersive, evolving, intriguing and ultra-fun from start to finish; impeccable voice acting and cinematics, and... 3D glasses!!

It's a stretch, but I had a little trouble with Penelope's grappling hook, if you must.

Developer: Sucker Punch Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment America Online: None Available: September



Tim Burton's

The Nightmare Before Christmas

Oogie's Revenge

An inventive, spirited adventure that's absolutely not to be missed



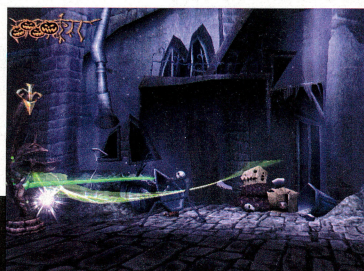
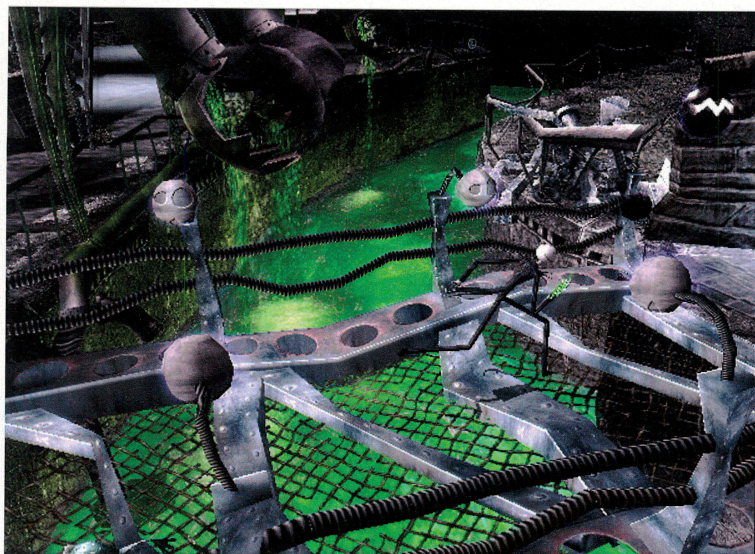
"...one of the most alluring hub-based adventures I've ever had the pleasure of playing."

The best thing to happen to stop motion animation, Christmas and Halloween since the 1964 Kizo Nagashima-directed *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* and *The South Park Halloween Special* (Death), respectively, Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* has been one of the most enduring brands in holiday history. Wielding enough studio cred to exert carte blanche where it really counts—most notably Nightmare and, of course, the perhaps even tastier *Corpse Bride*, whose puppets move with CG fluidity due to new digital stop motion techniques—Burton and company's accomplishments with puppets are, in a word, awe-inspiring...a lot for the game to live up to, especially given the ruthless nature of the market place. Make it too linear and easy for fans, and the gamers will balk; but make it too difficult or innate and they'll toss their controllers and begin weaving grouchy internet threads. So what to do? Call in Capcom, of course, remake it a couple of times to get it just right, and then release it amidst little to no analogous competition in

time for the Q4 rush.

In striking the right balance between movie fans and gamers, I say they nailed it and then some. Although it takes a good while to get to the real meat of the game (the initial missions drag just a tad), the overall breadth of the gameplay is tailor-made for a wide variety of players. Wielding the Soul Robber (a rubbery whip that slaps and grabs) fashioned by Dr. Finklestein to beat back a resurrected Oogie, the gameplay is part *Devil May Cry* lite and part *Space Channel 5*, at least initially. Carrying out a laundry list of fairly menial tasks as per Jack's spectral hound Zero (who's always on hand to remind you where you should be) and with Halloween Town acting as home base, Jack scours the film's twisted landscapes, beating down enemies for loot to use in the Witch's Shop to further his quest and reclaim the holiday doors liberated by Lock, Shock and Barrel, the three conniving brats responsible for resurrecting Oogie in the first place. Utterly devious and deceitful, you can't help but wonder if it's a good thing or bad; they are in Halloween Town,





after all, where mayhem is encouraged.

Beyond the first gaggle of missions, which serve as a sort of introduction to the world, things get considerably more complex via environmental puzzles and boss battles (swapping out Dr. Finklestein's brain with a diabolical one installed by Oogie is definitely a highlight) where Jack uses the Soul Robber to collect musical notes to unleash a fury of beat-based combo attacks. Not only is the music here absolutely spectacular as the incomparable Danny Elfman combines his bouncy Oingo Boingo chops with enchanting holiday fare, but the fact that how fast you beat a boss relies on both rhythm and traditional dodging and attacking prowess is pretty ingenious, if not perfectly suited to the material. I also found the traditional item screen, a la Ys, a welcome variable along with the commerce system, which rewards the player based on how well and handily you wield Jack's abilities, which ultimately take on two additional forms: the fire-spewing Pumpkin King Jack (and you can build all of Jack's attacks) and, of course, the present-tossing Santa Jack.

I began Nightmare trotting around the fixed-camera environments (which I welcome; moving freely toward and away from the camera affords such a better sense of the world compared to being glued to a character's backside) thinking it was going to be yet another drab, scripted action-adventure, but once

the game opened up, I found it one of the most alluring hub-based adventures I've ever had the pleasure of playing. The models, both core and ancillary, are stunning (especially the larger, more ominous creatures); the landscapes drop-dead gorgeous, as if built brick by brick; the music, interminably charming; and the narrative far beyond the norm. There's also a ton of replayability here, repeating areas for perfect scores a la Maximo, and hidden areas galore to discover, where Jack can drop in to bolster his bank account. My sole complaint with Nightmare is the loading on PS2, and a few odd camera angles here and there; otherwise this is about as good as this type of gaming gets. Don't listen to posers who complain of camera woes; fixed cameras can spin cinematic gold. The best games make you come to them; remember that and don't be afraid to hone your skills when such vast rewards await.

Dave Halverson

Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge **8.5**
PlayStation 2, Xbox **Score**

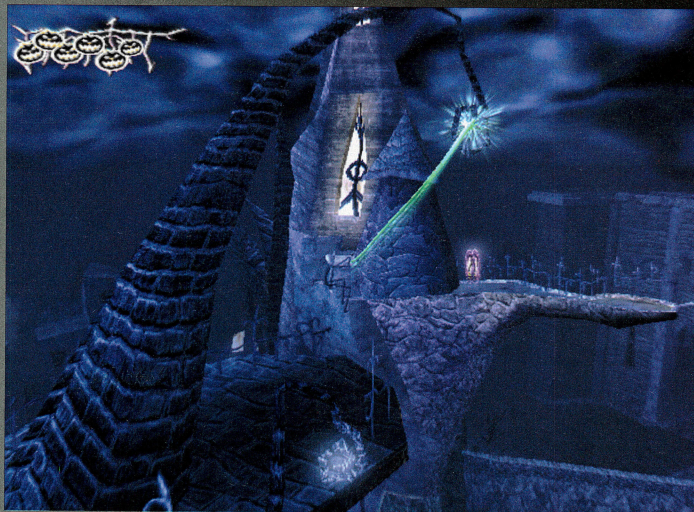
✓ Captivating visuals, stellar soundtrack, imaginative battle system, deep, adventure-based gameplay, triple-A voice work.

✗ Bothersome loading on PS2, a few tricky camera angles, slow start.

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Buena Vista Games
Online: None **Available:** October



This 5-eyed arachnid means business. Jack'll need some serious rhythm to shrink him down to size.



Jack's Soul Robber is among the best action/utility devices in recent memory. You can never get enough of it, and the techniques are endless.

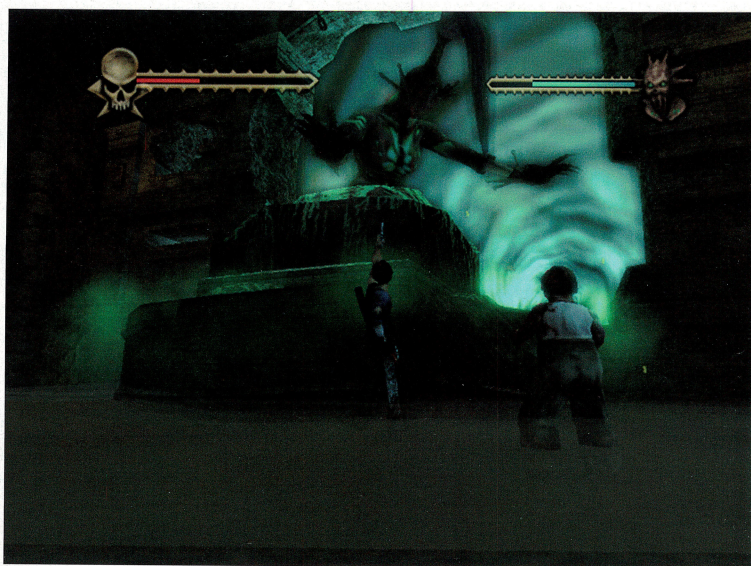


EVIL DEAD

REGENERATION

Kick Ash!

Haynie 2005



Having been deposited directly into the loony bin for sawing off his own arm (among other seemingly insane assertions), Ash finally gets his comeuppance when his hottie attorney Sally gets a hold of Professor Noby's diary and discovers that his declarations of evil were indeed actually sound. Even so, his ascension from Willow Creek won't be an easy one. Without the diary, Dr. Reinhardt's little science project in the basement (something about the end of the world as we know it) goes horribly awry, sending the cataclysmic evil of the Necronomicon into the immediate vicinity and beyond. Armed with only his stump and a handgun, freedom via boomstick and chainsaw is still a few blood-soaked floors away as we lumber through the perfunctory training level in the latest (and by far best) Evil Dead game. Thanks to me, you can meander through the kill-the-animated-corpses-to-open-the-way splatter-fest of the sanitarium knowing full well that what waits on the other side is the definitive Evil Dead video game experience.

Beyond the confines of the sanitarium, the game world in Regeneration is composed of vast outer sprawls upon which developer Cranky Pants delivers action

and adventure surprises in succession with a doggedly imaginative barrage of enemies, environmental puzzles and play mechanics, beginning with Satan's gift to sidekicks, Sam: Dr. Reinhardt's Deadite lab rat who takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'. Poor Sam's undergone so much Necronomicon experimentation that he's half eaten away, but that hasn't slowed him down or shut him up a bit. Like a little, undead, pissed-off Joe Pesci/Energizer Bunny, Sam plays off of Ash's deadpan wisecracks so deftly they instantly become gaming's most promising action duo. (If there were an award for best banter, Regeneration would win hands down.) And being dead definitely has its advantages: Playing as Ash, you can punt Sam onto enemies' shoulders to pop off their heads, ride them like wild bulls to open blocked passages, or sic him on an assailant's leg, doggy style, to keep them occupied while you deal the fatal blow. But the real fun comes by way of standing on marked altars and possessing Sam, sending him out on his own to open Ash's way, cuing the porno-funk fusion while dealing pint-sized pain, firing spirit shots, popping off heads and waddling about while trying not to get dead. Sam can't die, but chunking

Sam looks on as Ash kicks some...

him in a grinder or getting him blown up sends you back to the beginning of the puzzle. Bottom line: Sam f---ing rocks.

Not to be outdone, Ash gets some love too, by way of a Hulk-a-riffic rage mode and some feverishly cool new hardware, beginning with one badass, industrial-sized harpoon that enables him to reel in victims and pop 'em into the air for multiple boomstick juggles, bouncing bodies overhead until they burst into chunks. And about the time even that doesn't do the trick, he fashions himself an arm cannon that fires time-release missiles, turning would-be attackers into meat piñatas. The art department put in overtime on Regeneration's creatures and bosses, fashioning enough fodder to make ample use of their two characters' ample abilities. The game doesn't recycle anything as Sam and Ash make their way from portal to portal, which in itself is one of the game's coolest elements. I won't tell you how you get into one, but they pop out the other side via a massive, oozing, flatulent rectum. Save it to say, the spirit of the franchise is in full gross bloom.

The only minor criticism I have with Regeneration is that the Ash model, while well devised, is a bit stiff and limited in terms of animation (especially jumping) and dynamic collision. It doesn't necessarily hurt the game, but a little more finesse would have added that much more to the overall package. Effects such as water and sheer curtains could also be better on Xbox, the version of choice by way of resolution and, of course, shorter load times. These minor infractions aside (pay them no mind and get this game), Evil Dead: Regeneration is one of the year's biggest and most pleasant surprises.

Dave Halverson

Evil Dead: Regeneration

PlayStation 2, Xbox

8.0

Score

Great play mechanics and level design, plus the coolest sidekick ever. EDR finally does the namesake justice.

Ash's animation is on the limited/stiff side and not dynamic to the environments, which could use a tad more detail on Xbox.

Developer: Cranky Pants Publisher: THQ

Online: None Avail: September



"...he fashions himself an arm cannon that fires time-release missiles, turning would-be attackers into meat piñatas."



Burnout Revenge

It is better to Burnout...

Burnout Revenge eats lives. It chomps free time and gleefully devours days and weeks. Without ado or reservation, and most definitely to the point: Revenge is that most rare sort of game that is so unabashedly good and fun as to inspire feelings of nervousness and unease when it's not being played.

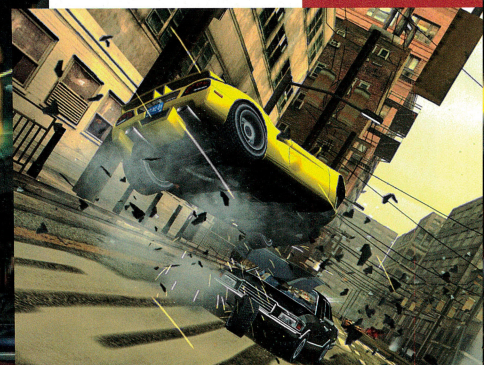
Come, Revenge beckons. Smash stuff. Race fast. Be merry and also joyous. Players are challenged to compete in a series of driving exhibitions (including straight-out sprints to the finish line and crash-'em-ups) where the aim is not just to win, but do so in a most destructive fashion. Competing drivers, be they computer-controlled or human, are encouraged to send the opposition crashing into guardrails, knock them flying into cavernous abysses, or force them to hurtle straight into a variety of unyielding obstacles. Crashes are spectacular happenings, punctuated with bursts of smoke and flame, shattered glass, imploded fenders and twisting, soaring, spinning car bodies. Each wreck is a visual affair to be savored and a delightful treat for a job nastily done.

The game excels at rewarding players. Compliments are thrown up on the screen at fairly regular intervals, even for such basic tactics as driving on the wrong side of the road or holding down the boost button for extended periods. It seems silly and over-the-top, but it works. Medals are given out for completing tasks, and a rating scheme tracks performance. Do well, and the game is very generous in unlocking new courses, competitions and cars. There's always a sense of momentum and progress, of having met a goal and gotten something good for the effort. In the process, Revenge becomes wonderfully, horribly addictive.

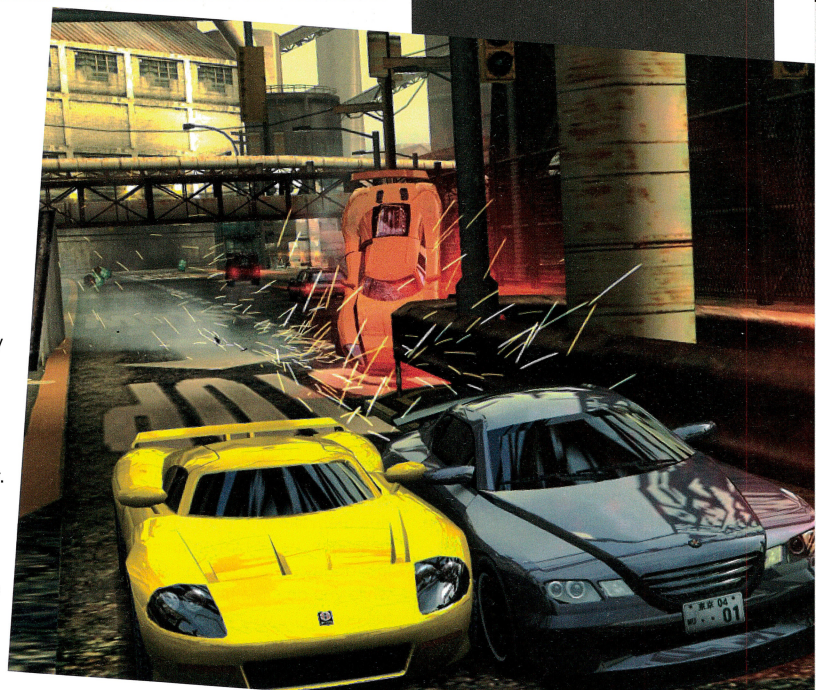
Scenery whips by at a tremendous pace. Cars zoom into the foreground almost as blurs. Revenge provides an awesome sense of speed, so much so that novice players will need to ration out the use of their boost power to avoid crashing repeatedly. It's astounding and perhaps even hyperbolic, but the game seems almost perfectly tuned to a normal human's reaction time so that, say, there's just enough time for a driver to swerve before a curve is indicated or an obstacle rushes into view. Even if the effect is purely coincidental, it's astounding. And if it's in any way intentional, the developers at Criterion should all insure their brains for \$5 million apiece.

Diverse as it is fast and generous, Revenge never succumbs to complacency. Crash competitions force drivers to create a logjam of crushed and burned cars to see how much destruction can be wrought with a single collision. A new traffic attack race provides for the ultimate in adrenaline as the goal is simply to smash into cars repeatedly to earn cash and additional play time. Grand Prix tournaments play out over three races, with the winner being the one with the combined best performance. Each new venue presents a unique set of pathways, jumps and opportunities for mischief, and nothing here ever gets old.

The package comes anchored with a control scheme so perfect as to be eminently forgettable. It's just another example of how Burnout got it right, and the checklist is all but comprehensive. This one, simply, wins. Greg Orlando



"Each wreck is a visual affair to be savored and a delightful treat for a job nastily done."



Burnout Revenge		9.5
PlayStation 2, Xbox		Score
	Beautiful, fast, crashtacular.	
	Addictive like crack.	
Developer: Criterion Publisher: Electronic Arts		
Online: 6p versus Available: September		



Only in Burnout is success measured by flying sparks and the sweet sound of bending metal.



DDR Extreme 2

PlayStation 2

Developer: Konami

Publisher: Konami

Online: Rankings, challenges

Available: September

8.0

Score

For you dueling DDR aficionados all around the globe, Konami's finally giving you what you've been clamoring for: an online system with a ranking ladder and challenges...so now you can tell people you're the best DDR player ever—and have the rank to back it up. With a great mix of songs from the USA and overseas, DDR Extreme 2 is ready for its new online presence. Sean Paul and Fatboy Slim step into the song list, and old-school favorites have also made the cut. Unlocking songs gets a bit tedious after a while (usually after you've played Boom Boom Dollar for the 47th time), but DDR Extreme 2 is still another successful addition to the franchise. AE



Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes

Xbox

Dev: Phantagram Pub: Microsoft Online: 6p co-op/versus, observation mode Avail: Sept

9.0

Score

Aside from enough bloodletting to fill the most avid Live junkie's dance card, the easiest of KUF: Heroes' five new single-player campaigns (Ellen's) is as difficult as some of the later stages in Crusaders. Heroes, like it or not, is definitely honed for the KUF rank and file, of which I belong, and I still had to restart at one point to better forge my troops—a worthwhile venture given the state of the graphics on display, with even more giant beasts doing battle amidst a sea of up to 200 on-screen combatants on new, more diverse terrain. I only wish they'd have fixed the mission-ops map and installed a slow-motion option to better deploy troops when the pressure is on. Dave Halverson



We Love Katamari

PlayStation 2

Developer: Namco

Publisher: Namco

Online: None

Available: September

9.0

Score

Na, na na naaa...that friggin' theme song still hasn't made it out of our heads from the first Katamari Damacy, and now we're being showered with a sequel! The story? The King of the Cosmos realizes that there's a whole universe without stars and planets, and calls again on the Prince to help him remake the galaxy. Missions won't just require you to roll up any old Katamari though; you must fulfill varied objectives, from fattening up a sumo wrestler to collecting a thousand paper cranes in a school. A two-player co-op mode has been introduced to Katamari's repertoire (a brilliant and challenging addition.) This is Katamari at its finest. AE



Urban Reign

PlayStation 2

Developer: Namco Publisher: Namco Online: None Available: September

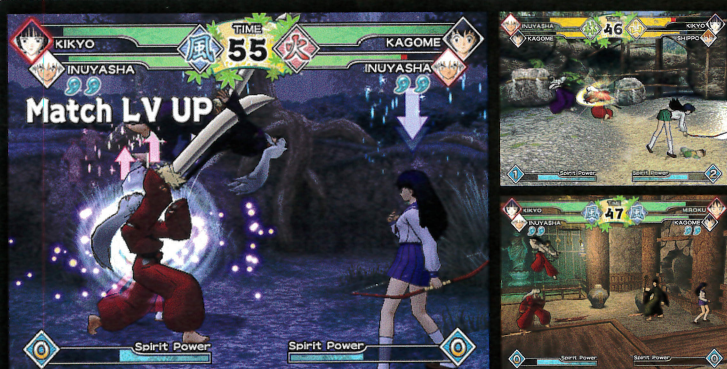
6.5

Score

With a basis in grappling as well as brawling, Namco's entry into the ever-growing library of thug-themed games is more like a flashier Def Jam than anything else. The action is fast and intuitive as you (and often a partner) battle handfuls of gangstas in highly destructible environments. Despite some attempts at variety, however, the missions grow repetitive quickly thanks to a limited move set, and in addition, character movement at times interferes with executing specific moves (you may move downward instead of executing a downward attack). Things are also dicey when it comes to the dodge/counter system. Urban Reign has flaws, but if you're one of the many that liked Fight for NY, this may be right up your grimy, graffiti-covered alley. Chris Hoffman

"Despite some attempts at variety, however, the missions grow repetitive quickly thanks to a limited move set"

Review Gallery



InuYasha: Feudal Combat

PlayStation 2

Developer: Yuke's Publisher: THQ Online: None Available: August

7.0

Score

In Japan, it's not always about reinventing the wheel as much as serving the brand and its users, especially where anime games are concerned. One man's token 3D fighter is another's oyster, and InuYasha should keep its flock firmly affixed to their PS2s. Not only is FC gorgeous, from the authentically modeled and voiced cast to the beautifully detailed and textured locales, but its simple yet strategic move set makes it amicable for amateurs or aces. It's also as deep (nuances abound) as the series is demon-filled. The Story Mode opens anew as each previous chapter is completed and travels multiple paths; Mission Mode piles on waves of attackers in character-specific scenarios to bolster your stats; and when the dust settles, you can take your show on the road in Battle Mode. *Dave Halverson*

"...its simple yet strategic move set makes it amicable for amateurs or aces"



Scooby-Doo! Unmasked

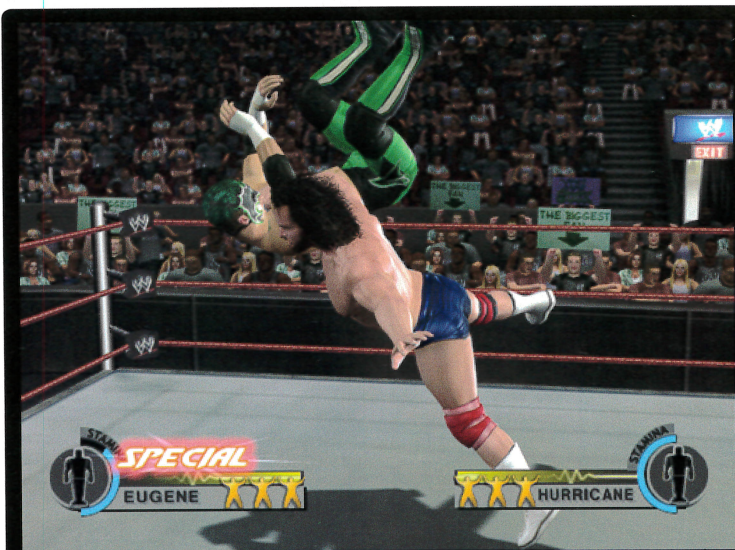
PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: A2M Publisher: THQ Online: None Available: September

8.0

Score

You'd be hard pressed to find better cartoon fodder than THQ's Scooby-Doo! Unmasked. Rather than rely solely on brand recognition when name alone would surely move the game, working with Artificial Mind and Movement, they've crafted a clever and infinitely enjoyable platformer that strays from formulas past just enough while remaining true to its kids-to-adults roots. More pure platformer than anything else, Scooby once again does the honors (and controls with surprising dexterity), tapping into several of his more colorful disguises in concert with the game's thematic worlds. With an unexpectedly satisfying soundtrack, well-placed cameos, superb voice talent and just enough environmental puzzles to accentuate the platforming, Unmasked keeps the flame flickering for one of the most endearing kid-friendly franchises going. *DH*



WWE Day of Reckoning 2

GameCube

Developer: Yuke's Publisher: THQ Online: None Available: August

8.0

Score

For their farewell match on the GameCube, THQ and Yuke's have put together yet another fine effort that delivers on their promise of a more authentic pro wrestling experience. More detailed visuals really enhance WWE Day of Reckoning 2's presentation, while the stamina meter adds a new sim-like dynamic to the already excellent game engine without becoming cumbersome, and the addition of several new characters keeps things fresh. The character dialogue is spot-on too, but unfortunately, so is the storyline—meaning it's pretty bad, just like recent WWE TV. As always, I don't see the point of a WWE game where you can't play through story mode as a WWE superstar, but DOR2 is solid fun nonetheless. *Chris Hoffman*



Devil Kings

PlayStation 2

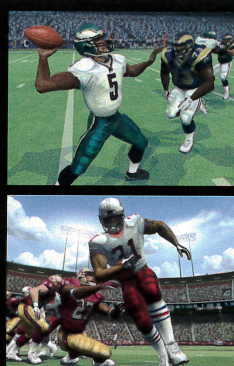
Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom Online: None Available: October

7.0

Score

Even though many aspects of Devil Kings emulate the Dynasty Warriors games—including hundreds of enemies to slaughter per stage, similar level design, the on-screen map, an experience system, item collection and in-game banter—this isn't just a clone of Koei's slash-'em-ups, but a game that actually improves upon them in several ways. Players can actually rotate the camera with the right analog stick; combat is more fluid; moves have more variety and offer more combo options; and slicing through enemies just has a much more satisfying, visceral feel. Of course, Devil Kings also has some of the flaws of Dynasty Warriors, like gameplay that gets repetitive pretty quick, and the draw-in is more significant than recent DW titles. *Chris Hoffman*

"...this isn't just a clone of Koei's slash-'em-ups, but a game that actually improves upon them in several ways."



Madden NFL 06

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

Developer: EA Tiburon Pub: Electronic Arts Online: 2p versus, chat Available: August

7.5

Score

Another year, another Madden. This edition is a mixed bag; on one hand, you have a great game of football—smart-as-hell AI, a plethora of features, improved Playmaker and great online play. But on the other, you've got a convoluted new passing system and player animations that are just plain lacking. The new Quarterback Vision gives the game an unnecessary level of realism: throw within the vision cone and you're more than likely to complete a pass, throw it outside and you risk an overthrown pass or worse. What sounded cool on paper fails in its execution. Why risk changing an already perfect passing system? I guess when you're the only game in town, you can do what you want. Tom Ham

"Why risk changing an already perfect passing system?"



Dynasty Warriors 5

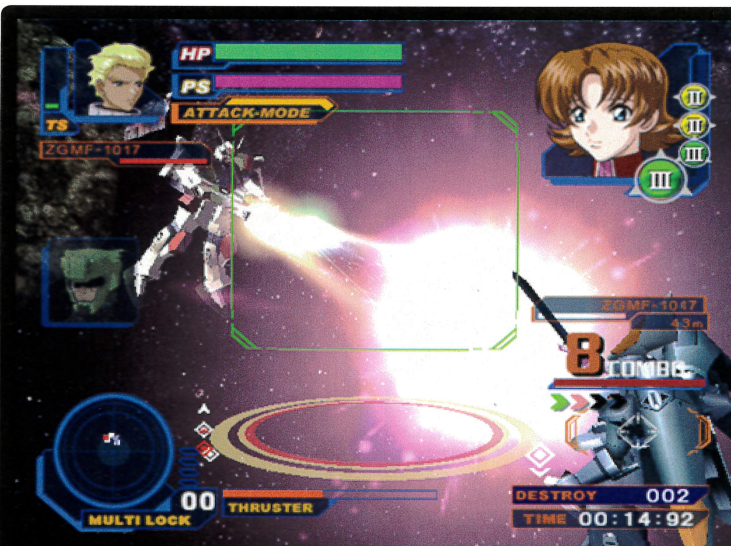
Xbox

Developer: Omega Force Publisher: Koei Online: None Available: September

6.5

Score

Finally, a Dynasty Warriors game where you can hear Asian dialogue coming from the characters' mouths instead of cheesy English! OK, so Chinese would have made more sense than Japanese, but to my gaijin ears, it's as good as gold. In other respects though, this is pretty much the same Dynasty Warriors players have been experiencing for years; by now, you probably already know whether you can't get enough of this series or if you tire of the repetitive button-mashing by the time the kill counter enters triple digits. At least this port is enhanced over the PS2 version with 5.1 sound and a co-op mode not as plagued by slowdown (although the pop-up in co-op is still staggering). Chris Hoffman



Mobile Suit Gundam Seed: Never Ending Tomorrow

PlayStation 2

Developer: Bandai Publisher: Bandai Online: None Available: September

7.0

Score

We all love our Gundam, but Bandai has to stop making the same game over and over. Granted, NET has 40-plus minutes of anime fresh from the heart-wrenching series, dual story modes featuring either Kira or Athron and arguably the best Gundam combat the series has rendered so far, thanks to newly polished controls, but at the end of the day, it's pretty much par for the Gundam course in terms of actual gameplay. Missions vary from protection to aerial and ground offensives, and there are lots of nuances here and a truly spectacular CG opener, but the déjà vu is loomin' large. I say make an MS 08th Team action-RPG with gameplay in and out of the Mobile Suits and call it a century. Dave Halverson



187 Ride or Die

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Ubisoft Publisher: Ubisoft Online: 4p versus Available: August

4.5

Score

Remember when talentless white rapper Vanilla Ice claimed he was from the streets, meaning he was authentic? And remember when Ice-T asked if the street in question was Sesame Street? Well, 187 Ride or Die may well be the Vanilla Ice of urban-themed racers. It tries very hard, mind you, but you'll still be getting lots of cursing, gratuitous use of the word "nigga" and hip-hop-fueled thug culture that seems too forced to come anywhere but from a marketer's meeting. Meanwhile, the game lets you shoot other racers with guns while you race in your "hooptie," which the suits are fairly certain means "car." So you may opt to ride or die, but it might be more interesting if you just started a nice stamp collection. Greg Orlando

"...hip-hop-fueled thug culture that seems too forced to come anywhere but from a marketer's meeting"



Big Mutha Truckers 2: Truck Me Harder

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Eutechnyx

Publisher: THQ/Empire Interactive

Online: None

Available: August

2.0

Score

Because Big Mutha Truckers wasn't a delicious enough pun, the subtle wordmasters at Eutechnyx thought to add an even more savory subtitle for the sequel to their brick-driving simulation. Big Mutha Truckers 2: Truck Me Harder offers plenty of opportunity to take a big rig on the most boring adventure of all: a quest to schlepp to a series of trading posts and bars where the game will load, seemingly for hours, before getting to the exciting world of commodity buying and selling. Insult to injury comes when players are forced to suffer an endless stream of bad jokes while they pilot their unresponsive turd through a wasteland. Foist this game on a hated enemy; it's surprising a bomb this big doesn't come ticking. Greg Orlando



One Piece: Grand Battle

PlayStation 2

Developer: Ganbarion Publisher: Bandai Online: None Available: September

8.0

Score

Bandai's other anime-based brawler also happens to be one of their very best games ever. Translating the buccaneer brouhaha of Shonen Jump's One Piece into a fighting game couldn't have been brought off any better. From the bouncy animated fonts to the pristine models and wicked-cool anime overlays, the game perfectly captures the madcap personality of the show. The Powerstone-tinged Grand Battle and Story modes are the stuff of item- and move-based versus battle dreams, and a super-cool (and unique) Mini-Game Mode lets you battle for actual crewmates in all manner of series-derived mayhem. Can't say I don't wish it was an action-adventure game, but I haven't enjoyed a fighting game this much in years. Dave Halverson



Midway Arcade Treasures 3

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Midway

Publisher: Midway

Online: None

Available: September

5.0

Score

With MAT 3, the definition of treasure is stretched thin enough to cover the distance from, say, New York to Disappointmentville. Eight arcade racing games are compiled here and simple mathematics says there's only 25 percent booty to be had. The package hearkens back to a simpler time when the road of life was littered with tanks bearing four-second nitro boosts, crazy jumps, shortcuts and wrenches carefully strewn in order to repair all the damage. It's quaint to be sure, and easily digestible, but don't think for a minute anyone is going to spend more than 30 seconds playing the barely controllable Rush the Rock or the boregasm that is Badlands. Greg Orlando



NHL 06

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

Developer: EA Canada

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Online: 2p versus, chat

Available: September

8.5

Score

Hockey fans are grinning from ear to ear. Not only is the player lockout over with, but we've got a kick-ass game of hockey that stands to be the best EA has ever produced. New for this season is the Skill Stick. Using the right analog stick, players can perform signature moves and aim their shots on goal on the fly. Coupled with cool dekeing maneuvers on the left stick, what you end up with is a fast-paced, heavy-hitting game of hockey. But the true star of the show is the visuals. Players show more facial detail and showcase smooth-as-silk transition animations that are just plain beautiful to watch. Together with stellar audio and play-by-play commentary, NHL 06 is top-notch. TH



"...the game perfectly captures the madcap personality of the show"



Tecmo Classic Arcade

Xbox

Developer: Tecmo

Publisher: Tecmo

Online: None

Available: September

7.0

Score

Tecmo might not have the rich arcade history that some other developers do, but this compilation of 11 games from years gone by still provides some arcade-perfect fun for the old-school gamer in you. For action fans, Rygar, Star Force and Strato Fighter will likely be the highlights, while sports gamers will wax nostalgic with the acclaimed Tecmo Bowl. The appeal of the other titles will likely depend on the individual but technologically, many, such as Senjyo, were well beyond their time. Unlike some other compilations, there are no emulation bugs to be found here, and the extra features, though limited, are presented well. Chris Hoffman



Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

Nintendo DS

8.5

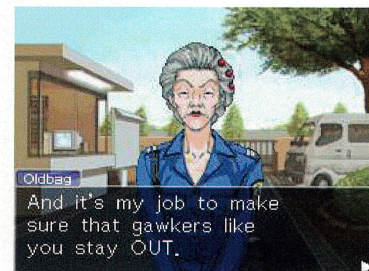
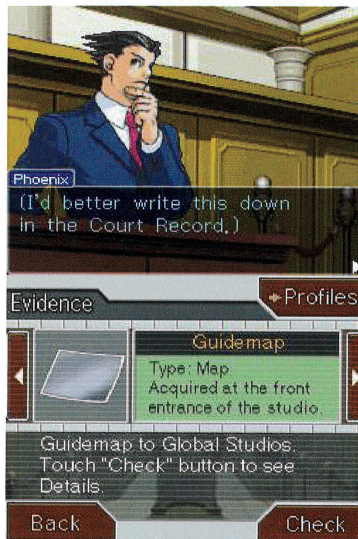
Score

Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom Multiplayer: None Available: October

I strongly object to anyone who thinks that the word "Attorney" in this game's title is evidence that this is some sort of boring, stodgy, rule-filled lawyer game. On the contrary, Phoenix Wright is about as exciting as a graphic-text adventure can be, bolstered by a fantastic translation; I laughed out loud at least a couple of times per chapter, and

any game that has an old woman named "Oldbag" and uses the words "wowzers" and "hootenanny" gets bonus points in my book. The meat of the game, not surprisingly, dramatically unfolds in the courtroom, but the proceedings only bear a slight resemblance to a real trial. There's no stifling procedure to learn—just the fun of catching witnesses telling lies and yelling "Objection!" into the microphone; present enough evidence to blow apart the witnesses' testimonies and you'll get to watch the amusing animations as they break down on the stand. The other half of the game—the menu-driven exploration scenes—isn't quite as compelling, since you pretty much just have to follow the path the programmers have determined, but it's still fun to hunt for clues and propel the story along. I can only hope that this title does well enough for Capcom to bring the other games in this series to the U.S.

Chris Hoffman



Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow

Nintendo DS

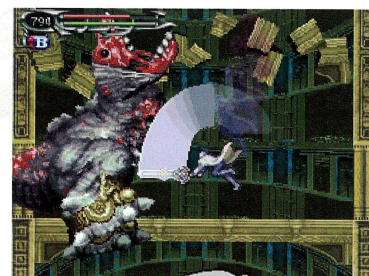
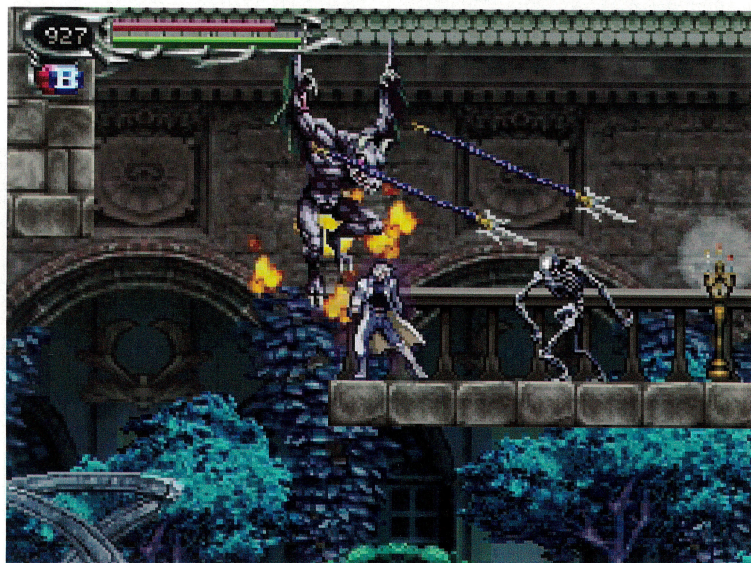
9.5

Score

Developer: Konami Publisher: Konami Multiplayer: 2p versus, soul trading Available: October

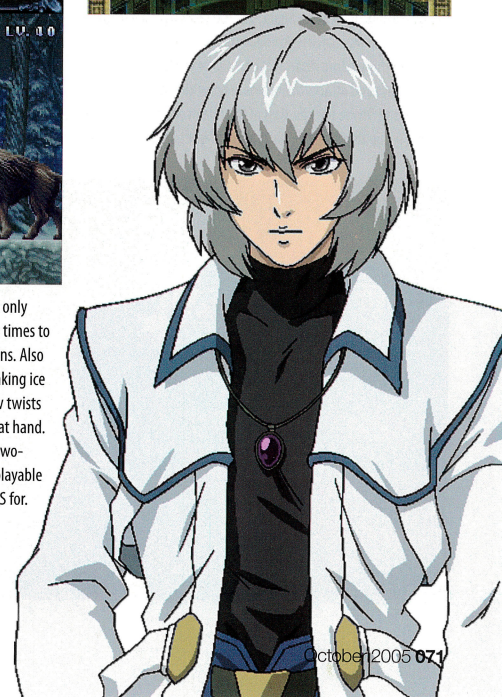
As soon as you turn on Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow and see that legendary castle, silhouetted by the moon as bats fly past, you'll feel it in your very soul: this is indeed the latest installment of one of the greatest series in gaming, and it's every bit as incredible as you could hope for. As with its predecessors, Dawn of Sorrow is a masterful

blend of action, adventure, horror and that ever-intoxicating Gothic atmosphere, all amongst some astoundingly detailed 2D visuals. As usual, hero Soma Cruz has access to a vast cache of weapons and a continually evolving move set, further opening up the castle for your exploration pleasure. Soma's ability to take enemy souls has evolved into a full-on obsession



this time out, as each of the more than 100 souls not only grants a unique power, but can be collected multiple times to increase their power or be used to create new weapons. Also adding appeal are the exclusive DS features, like breaking ice blocks by tapping the screen, which serve to add new twists to the gameplay without detracting from the action at hand. And after you're done with the game, there's even a two-player mode to keep you busy, as well as additional playable characters. This is the kind of game worth buying a DS for.

Chris Hoffman



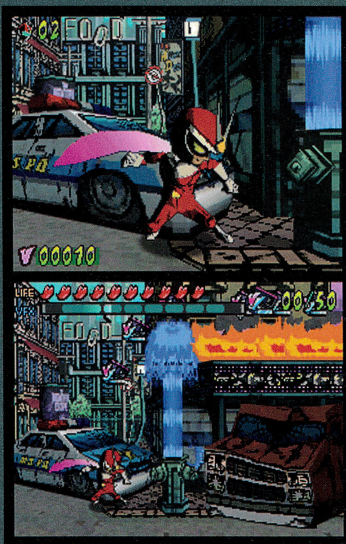
Viewtiful Joe: Double Trouble

Nintendo DS

Preview

Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom Multiplayer: TBA Available: November

Where the justifiably celebrated Yoshi Touch & Go used the stylus as the catalyst for the gameplay, Double Trouble incorporates it with similar cleverness to bolster the ferocity of the already-renowned design—one of the last bastions of 2D gaming on console, now a franchise in the making on handheld. Via the same vivid 3D dioramas enjoyed on the PS2 and GameCube, only with Joe up close on the top



screen and zoomed out down below, the stylus is used to spot and disable enemy traps, scratch (unleashing objects overhead) and even edit levels, clearing the way for Joe by all manner of level-induced trickery. Multitasking, such as quickly ducking and scratching, takes some getting used to, but the action is tailor-made for the job; thus, once mastered, it becomes like everything else in the game: Viewtiful. **Dave Halverson**

The Con

PSP

Preview

Developer: Think & Feel Inc. Publisher: Sony Multiplayer: 2p versus, game sharing Available: October

On the surface, The Con seems like a fairly typical thuggin' and buggin' urban brawler: select a fighter specializing in Tae Kwan Do, street boxing, wrestling, kickboxing or Jeet Kune Do, or create one of your own, then train to raise stats in between pummeling opponents with a variety of blows, grapples and easy-to-execute special moves. But the twist lies in the L button, which can be used to soften your blows or take more damage from your opponent. That might sound backwards, but it's all part of setting up a con, thereby earning your team more money and respect; sometimes it even means betting against yourself and convincingly

throwing the fight. Too bad the gameplay is feeling a bit lacking at this point. **Chris Hoffman**



Kingdom of Paradise

PSP

Preview

Developer: Climax Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment America Multiplayer: 2p versus, skill exchanging Avail: November

Aside from some quality launch titles and the occasional gem like Death, Jr., the PSP landscape has been pretty bleak recently. Games of any type have been few and far between, let alone ones worth getting excited about. Enter Sony's action-RPG, Kingdom of Paradise—and suddenly things are looking exciting again. Set 300 years ago in a land of mysticism and martial arts, Kingdom of Paradise tells the story of a world thrown into disarray when one of the five martial clans betrays and attacks the others in order to obtain the all-powerful Divine Swords. Cast in the role of young warrior Shinbu, it's up to the player, naturally, to fight back against the

rebellious clan and restore balance to the world. Fortunately, you'll have a lot of abilities at your disposal to do it: the game features 15 types of martial arts, and Shinbu can master a staggering 150 types of sword fighting techniques; additional items and skills will even be available for download through the PSP's Wi-Fi connection. Shinbu will also get some female companionship in the form of Surin, but how she factors into gameplay is currently unknown; maybe she'll be playable in the game's two-player versus mode? If KOP ends up playing as good as it looks, this might be just what the PSP needs at just the right time. **Chris Hoffman**



Trauma Center: Under the Knife

Nintendo DS

8.5

Score

Developer: Atlus Publisher: Atlus Multiplayer: None Available: October

I never thought a game could get so intense using a stylus. You'll learn to be lightning-quick in Trauma Center—tapping from tool to tool, cutting, injecting, suturing, bandaging, doing things with your hands you never thought possible—because if you're not, it's the patient whose life is over, and that's not something you can afford. Dramatic anime-style storytelling really makes you care



about the characters, although it's the totally unique and technique-filled gameplay that's the real hook; this truly fulfills Nintendo's promise of innovation on the DS. And even though this is a game about surgery, this is no sim; the plot and gameplay are maximized for fun, not realism. Healing in a video game can be just as fulfilling as violence. **Chris Hoffman**

Trace Memory

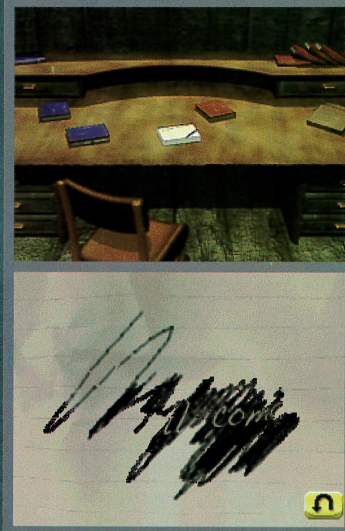
Nintendo DS

7.0

Score

Developer: CING Publisher: Nintendo Multiplayer: None Available: September

In the vein of classics like King's Quest, Trace Memory is a point-and-click mystery/adventure where the challenge revolves not around action but around finding and using items to climb deeper into the game world. Actually, "challenge" is a bit of a stretch, as most of the puzzles have obvious solutions located right near the problem at hand. It's pretty short and linear too, and as far as I can tell, you can't



die. Nonetheless, I found myself enjoying Trace Memory's narrative (up until the ending), as well as the myriad of tasks accomplished using the DS's unique interface; I especially liked the wood stamps. If you like this genre, check Trace Memory out, otherwise, forget about it. Personally, I'm up for a longer, tougher sequel. **Chris Hoffman**

DK: King of Swing

Game Boy Advance

7.0

Score

Developer: Paon Publisher: Nintendo Multiplayer: 4p versus Available: September

I'm not entirely convinced that DK: King of Swing's grab-and-spin gameplay is really a good enough mechanic to base an entire game around—it seems more like it should be an element of gameplay within a much broader platformer—but for what it is, this game provides a fun, challenging time that makes the most out of its constraints. The action remains simple and is relegated almost entirely to the L and R buttons, but innovative level design, featuring



obstacles like tornado-force winds, slippery surfaces, mechanical devices and grab points that cascade like water (among others), keep things exciting and constantly evolving. The boss encounters are especially unique, and the ability to restore life manually cuts down on undue frustration. **Chris Hoffman**

Nintendogs

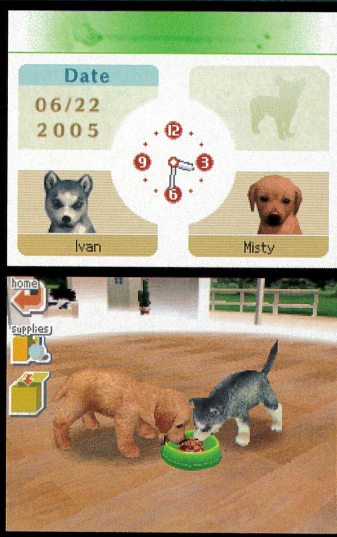
Nintendo DS

9.0

Score

Developer: Nintendo Publisher: Nintendo Multiplayer: 2p bark mode Available: August

At first, I was a total skeptic about Miyamoto's newest creation. Raising a puppy on your DS? Then I bought my first Nintendog... and at that moment, I was hooked. You might compare Nintendogs to a Tamagotchi, but it's infinitely cooler. Training your virtual pooch to sit, shake and beg has never been so much fun, and rumor has it you don't need all three cartridges to access the different



breeds of dogs... I'll just say you should start saving up all that competition money! For those needing something quick to toy with, Nintendogs plays both sides of the fence by allowing short bursts of play, or a long day of competitions and training. Yet another splendid (and strangely addicting) app for the DS. **Ashley Esqueda**

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex

8.5

PSP

Score

Developer: G-Artists Publisher: Bandai Multiplayer: 4p versus Available: September

I've gone on so many missions with Section 9, I feel like I'm on the squad. In SAC for the no-longer-so-fledgling PSP, the missions are everything you'd expect from the series, as what begins as the simple retrieval of a sensitive government document about to go public gradually spirals into a vast conspiracy that's got skin jobs frying their brain-cases faster than you can say "login." For our part, playing as either Motoko, Batou, Togusa or Saito (player's choice), the name of the game is decrypting cyber-brains, hunting down rogue skin jobs, defusing bombs, protecting dignitaries, rescuing hostages and other such Section 9-type fodder that help make

SAC more than your typical FPS. Amidst the impeccably voiced never-ending data stream of techno-jargon—the entire cast is, of course, present—you embark on Event and Sub Missions awash in futuristic gleam, while ogling flawless models; there's even a "view" button to check out your character or Tachikoma at any time. All this while earning precious munitions to bolster your characters and rig your Tachikoma like a Humvee from hell for wireless mayhem. Precise aiming on the run is a little dicey on the PSP, and the loading times can be extraneous, but it's a small price to pay to get Motoko and company into your mobile unit. **Dave Halverson**



Namco Museum Battle Collection

8.0

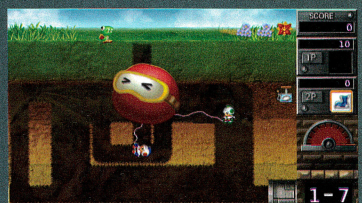
PSP

Score

Developer: Namco Publisher: Namco Multiplayer: 2-4p co-op/versus, game sharing Available: August

As classic compilations go, Namco Museum Battle Collection is quite a good one. Among giants such as Pac-Man, Ms. Pac-Man, Galaga, Dig Dug and Xevious, you'll also find games like Rolling Thunder, Bosconian, Mappy, and Tower of Druaga. There are also remastered versions of Pac-Man, Galaga, Dig Dug, and Rally X that feature not only updated graphics and gameplay but also simple wireless competition. However, while I did have fun playing around with these remixes, it was enjoying some of the great classics on here that gave me the most pleasure. At the default resolution, the game captures nicely the crispness of the

original CRTs, and especially with Galaga, I was transported instantly back in time. It was awesome! **Michael Hobbs**



Virtua Tennis World Tour

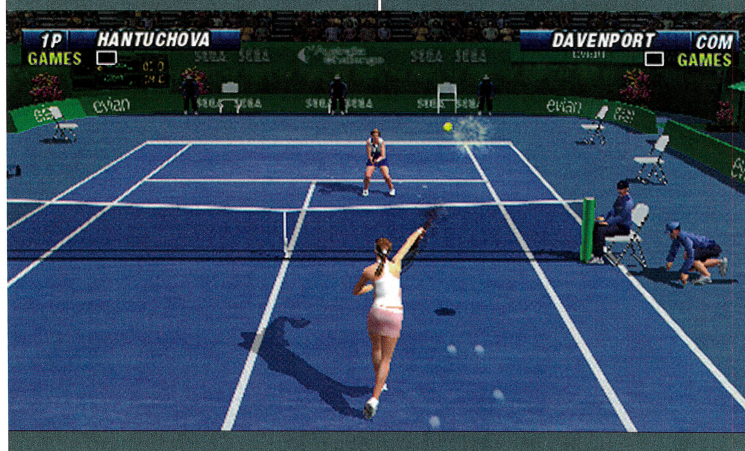
PSP

Preview

Developer: Sega Publisher: Sega Multiplayer: 4p co-op/versus Available: September

Although the PSP's Virtua Tennis World Tour has big-name players such as Venus Williams and Roger Federer, it's perhaps more fun to create a brutish, Frankenstein's monster-esque racketeer, one with a protruding forehead, flared nose and square jaw, and then take him out onto the courts in the RPG-like World Tour mode. As a neophyte tennis star, Mr. Brute won't fare so well, but hey! A slew of wacky minigames will teach him fancy footwork and improve his skills so he'll be able to compete in tournaments, win cash, buy goodies and eventually crush all who oppose him. Tour also features four-player multiplayer

matches, and the tennis, by the by, is the sort of video ambrosia the gods would consume. **Greg Orlando**



IT'S WAR TAKE COMMAND!



Jump into the trenches and lead your troops through real-time, 3-D combat. Set the strategy or pull the trigger yourself. Either way, it's world war, and you get to decide the outcome.

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

Violence

DOLBY
PRO LOGIC II



NINTENDO
GAMECUBE™

Preview

Age of Conan

See your adventure driven before you

There's never been a fantasy world as grim as Robert E. Howard's Hyboria. Written during the 1930s, long before World War II's wake-up call, racial equality or the sexual revolution, Howard's themes and characters—as interpreted through our modern sensibilities—are consistently bleak and frequently offensive. The gods are vengeful, violent zealotry and lustful slavery run rampant while roving bands of Pict wildmen clash with expanding cities as a burgeoning civilization attempts to rise. Who better to get a dark world back on its feet than recently crowned King Conan? Funcom will draw from 70 years of resource material to capture this brutal fantasy epoch in Age of Conan, an online action-RPG with a unique mix of single-player and massively multiplayer gameplay built on next-gen technology that will change your perception of graphics in the genre...and bring your current PC wheezing and coughing to its knees.

The first objective is freedom

Age of Conan will open with you languishing in the hull of a slave galley, faceless and devoid of history. As you are rowing under the duress of heavy chains, you can see the slave driver moving about the deck, lashing his whip to the tune of plaintive cries. Suddenly a warship slams into the side of the slave galley, tearing through and splintering the smaller vessel. As enemy soldiers pour into the damaged ship, you are able to break free from your shackles.

You immediately take on the slave driver in combat. After you've secured your freedom—literally and symbolically—with a victory, you will begin to take shape as an individual. Leave it to the writers of The Longest Journey to create an interactive prologue before a traditional online RPG character creation process begins. Drifting there in the water, you will start to mold your character's appearance, beginning with the selection of your origin race: Aquilonian, Stygian or Cimmerian. You will then apply basic facial and physical characteristics, and from a destitute ex-slave you will rise, gaining stature and form, battle scars and tattoos, developing an avatar and reputation as you see fit. Just don't forget the instinct for survival you first demonstrated, as there are consequences to the forces you invoke in Age of Conan.

Rituals of combat

Conflict runs through the fabric of this

"...there are consequences to the forces you invoke in Age of Conan."

The cries of slave women are barely audible over the din of a roaring demon.



world, and it's a key facet of Age of Conan. Battles will break out among the rabble on the streets, as all of the NPC AI is based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In addition to needing nourishment, rest and the company of others, intelligent characters also need to feel safe. While this is accomplished on a wider scale with NPCs building forts and even small cities, in Hyboria, safety is usually achieved face-to-face, none too subtly, by purging the threat. Funcom is taking great measures to ensure that the impact of both armed and unarmed physical combat is communicated to the player. Conan's "Real Combat" system has found a basis in Akido, where one divides the area around an opponent into a pie chart, with strikes from above, below, and to the shoulders, stomach and so forth. This system is focused on flow, allowing a natural and elegant method to string together moves with impressive location-specific damage, while leaving space for all character types to improve with special combos. The system is to be adapted for magic use as well, with healing or aggressive enchantments pulled from natural and divine sources. Combat control will be compatible with gamepads, so it most certainly speaks to fun and accessibility, but the conflict in Age of Conan is not limited to random, fleeting scuffles.

Bringing people together to rip foes apart

Crafting good privately spawned content for coordinated groups of players has become an art form in the online RPG space. Age of Conan will include elaborate instanced dungeons featuring interactive traps and complex enemy behavior and scripting. These are promising features, given weightier credibility when one considers that Funcom actually introduced instancing to the genre in the first place. Grouping with others, irrespective of environment, will provide extra experience point rewards for every worthy kill. Players can also line up in formations—a first in the genre—to gain additional combat bonuses. This intriguing play mechanic will come to fore in Age of Conan's epic multiplayer siege warfare, and players won't be limited to strafing the front lines. Siege battles against both players and the game's AI will be waged between the three origin races. The NPC forces will launch attacks as they reach critical mass, sort of like the accumulation

effect of a computer opponent in a RTS title. It's important to bring the battle to their walls first, crushing the resistance before it can gain momentum. A player might take the lead as a strategist or commander, and if you miss the offensive break, there's a builder role as well, for those interested in assembling their city's defenses. Players will be able to decide exactly how they'd like to invest the skills of their character when they choose to partake in siege warfare gameplay.

Keeping it in perspective

The initial single-player phase of Age of Conan is a deep RPG experience with four branching story arcs and many side quests. You'll be exposed to corruption in Conan's court and dubious celestial dealings. Since players may want to return and experience everything the campaign offers (with this team of writers, that could be a popular decision), the chatting interface will be available right away so friends can stay in touch. You will be able to transfer your efforts, including stats, items, weapons and customized appearance, from the single-player game into the massively multiplayer portion—but you won't be locked into every choice you've made up to that point. Let's say you develop a stealthy rogue in the single-player campaign; you'll be able to transfer those thieving skills to the MMO game and further evolve that character—with a myriad of abilities and special attacks—up to level 80. Funcom is dedicated to delivering a killer experience for serious online players, and they're devoting huge resources to high-level encounters and competitive PvP. However, the core design of AoC is meant to allow real progression for people with 10 hours or less per week to spend on the game. That's a challenging spectrum of different play styles to appeal to and the team knows it. Instead of second-guessing themselves, the producers, artists and designers are talking directly to the community via the game's forums and implementing their most important wishes. **Mike Griffin**

Age of Conan

PC

Preview

Point of Interest

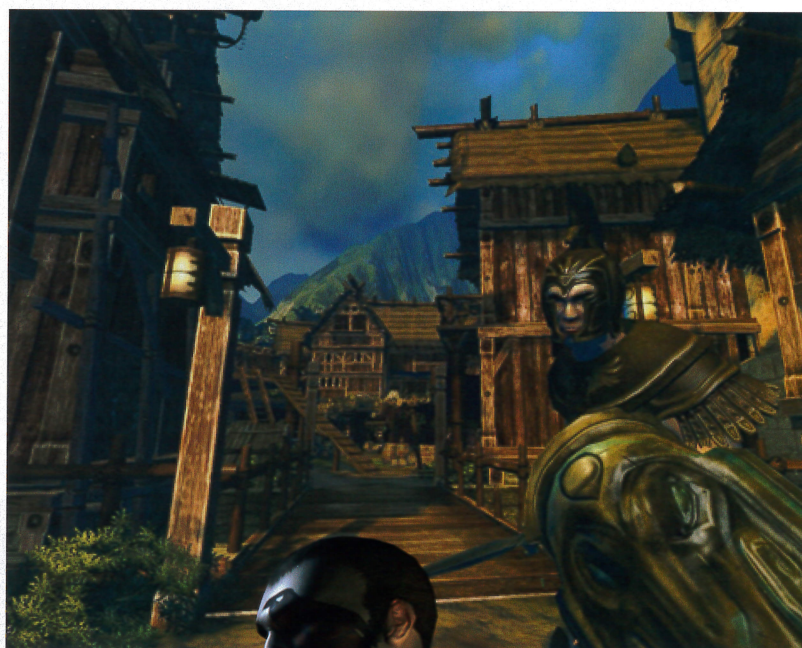
Mitra is worshipped as the universal god of the Hyborians in King Conan's country of Aquilonia.

Developer: Funcom Publisher: Funcom

Online: Massively Multiplayer Available: May 2006



"Age of Conan will include elaborate instanced dungeons featuring interactive traps and complex enemy behavior and scripting."



AoC's next-gen engine will emphasize detail, expression and atmosphere in equal parts.



Review

Fable: The Lost Chapters

What's lost is found to be very good indeed

Recommended system specs

OS: Windows XP	Video: GF 6600/Radeon X700
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: Direct Sound compatible
Memory: 512 MB RAM	Internet: N/A

While sorting through the array of screenshots taken during the length of Fable: The Lost Chapters (snapped with a handy in-game Photo Journal), it's fairly amazing to see the dramatic physical changes one's character goes through during his journey. This twig of a man in his early 20s with glowing skin, jet-black lid and matching mustache became a stout, grizzled and whitened Hero in his 50s. This transformation is a reminder of the vast amount of *stuff* your character has been through during his chronicles across Albion. Yes, there's significantly more to experience now in TLC, and in response to player requests, there's a little more optional flavor and a great deal more core content. Without going into detail and spoiling your adventure, let's just say these are the kind of side stories and resolutions you *wanted* to know about and the kind of critical decisions—with juicy implications—you wish you were given in the original Fable.

Despite all the body and personality customization expanded in TLC, Fable is ultimately an action-RPG driven by spell-casting and sword-fighting through missions that must be completed in order to advance your character's storyline. Some niggling gameplay issues from the original game have tagged along in The Lost Chapters. The lock-on targeting is

still dependent on line-of-sight, no matter how close you are to the target, so the slightest obstruction will instantly drop you from lock-on mode—resulting in awkward direction changes. Also, there is still no in-mission progress save, so you'll be kicked back to the quest area entrance if you fail and the mission will reset. Lionhead has adapted the game's controls for mouse and keyboard about as well as one could hope. There are minor miscues, like having Flourish and Run share the same button (occasionally causing undesired lunging attacks), but most of the migration worked out very well. You can assign expressions and actions to number keys 1 through 9—a familiar configuration for any PC RPG player—and your spell bank, grouped in pairs assigned to the mouse 1 and 2 buttons, is accessed quickly with a roll of the mouse wheel. Combined with superior camera control, the core action-RPG gameplay of Fable feels really good on PC.

The question, then: do you pick up this version before the Xbox TLC comes out? If you have a powerful PC, by all means. This version looks amazing. The options scale up really high, in fact, beyond a point—unfortunately—where even a single GeForce 6800 or Radeon X850 can manage a perfectly smooth frame rate. Even scaled down a little, however,



"...there's significantly more to experience now in TLC, and in response to player requests, there's a little more optional flavor and a great deal more core content."

the game has never looked better—and the amazing soundtrack and top-notch voice acting consistently impress. Toss in the restored areas and creatures with new, world-altering quest and story additions, and Fable: The Lost Chapters is a one-of-a-kind game for the PC in 2005. Incidentally, TLC provided about 23 hours of gameplay (to completion) during the review, and this includes a healthy dose of side-quests and mini-games and an unhealthy obsession with slaying many, many Hobbes. **Mike Griffin**



Fable: The Lost Chapters

PC

8.5
Score

It's Fable super-sized, with all the trimmings and extras. If you know Fable's story, prepare for some cool new twists.

Elements of the control could've been improved in this version. Chugs a little when mowed out, even on higher-end PCs.

Developer: Lionhead Studios Publisher: Microsoft
Online: None Available: September



The joys of arena combat. The Witchwood Arena returns in The Lost Chapters with new challenges.

be tied around the notion of capturing ground.

Wedgwood: For example, on the Canyon map you've seen, the principal objective for the EDF at the start of the round is to establish a bigger outpost so they can start deploying loads of equipment. See, when you deploy something like an artillery gun, and you spot a big Skycrane flying overhead with the huge crate...you actually call for that as a player, and it's flown in and deployed so you can attack things on the other side of the map. In that Canyon level, you need to escort your mobile command post to the center of the map.

In this instance, what would Strogg players be up to?

Wedgwood: From the Strogg perspective, they need to get intelligence on everything that's going on and establish defense in the area. So in that kind of scenario, one of the teams could basically be on defense. But because the frontline moves through the map as these territorial sections are taken, you always know exactly where the combat is going on. So you don't have people dissipating all over the map looking for people to kill. When you take that objective and push someone back and claim that territory, we're making sure there's always a consistent method—in terms of interface, HUD and communications—to know precisely what you need to achieve.

Cloud: That's one of the things we're liking about Quake Wars and these focused objectives: they bring the teams together.

What kind of leadership system are you using?

Cloud: We're taking what we had in Wolfenstein, which was a fireteam system, and evolving that into basically a squad leader type of position. We're working towards a context-sensitive system where [the squad leader] can point at an object—and there are some basic common things you can do to that object—and he's able to send that message to his team.

Do certain classes enhance the power of vehicles?

Wedgwood: Bear in mind that unlike most games, the vehicles in Quake Wars aren't just a replacement for your character with different armor, mobility and firepower. Each of our vehicles has a special combat role, so in a sense they can be thought of as being a bit like character classes. For example, the Goliath alien walker can transform itself and hunker down into a more fully armored vehicle with better firing angles. There's nothing like that on the EDF team, you know; they have tanks and stuff. So the way that the Goliath is piloted and the person that operates as the gunner...they might have certain

advantages.

Cloud: We're still working through it. The concern is if you allow classes to heavily alter a vehicle, you lose some reliability in it. Like, if somebody jumps out and another person jumps in, and now the vehicle is something different...

"Yeah, we're staying close to the Quake universe. Like the Strogg's use of enemy bodies and how they pull out energy from them to replenish their own health..."

Kevin Cloud, artist, id Software

What type of vehicle control can players expect?

Cloud: Well, the flying vehicles are really maneuverable. Turns on a dime...Paul and I have been able to do barrel rolls. Almost everything has a driver and a gunner position for support. We're figuring out cooperative controls and communication for vehicles, where the gunner and driver work together to call targets. The nice thing is that if you're in a territory you own, you can actually call in a vehicle and have it dropped to you.

Wedgwood: It's also worth mentioning the physics. We decided we wanted to have vehicle physics that were more akin to Gran Turismo or good rally games, so we worked out a solution with the programmers at id. Our vehicles have suspension, they can do jumps and tricks, and you can roll them. If you jumped into a Strogg vehicle, like the Hornet, let's say: it's got six Gravitonic Repulsors, so the way it reacts to terrain is based on a real model of gravity control.

Are you considering adding persistent stats and rewards?

Wedgwood: We're researching it. In the end, it has to benefit gameplay. You know, you don't want a server full of people with über rocket launchers, and then people join the server and they're completely overwhelmed. Unlike an RPG, like World of Warcraft or something, where you have these distinct areas to go to...if the rewards are worth having, they must ultimately unbalance the game for the people who don't have those rewards. And when you're all competing on the same playing field, that makes the playing field

unbalanced.

Cloud: We'll definitely have something similar to the campaign mode in Wolfenstein Enemy Territory, where you have a series of maps that are tied together and a reward system that pays off for the people who work well with their team.

These outdoor maps are huge. How is the Doom 3 engine pulling this off?

Cloud: Splash Damage basically started off with the Doom technology, then worked with us at id to modify it into a major outdoor rendering technology that's completely new.

Carmack's "Megatexture"

technology...what's up with that name?

Wedgwood: 'Cause it's a *really* big texture!

Cloud: [laughs] The Megatexture, right. With it, we have this unlimited canvas and a friction detection system across the entire level on the different surfaces of things. So it really determines what routes certain vehicles will take. Some vehicles can go off road and move very quickly, pull off dramatic jumps and things like that. Sometimes tanks are needed. So the friction, combined with these atmospheric effects we've created and new uses for particles...for this type of game, we're doing stuff that nobody else has done before.



Know your role in combat, whether defending key artillery posts or driving toward the frontlines.



Preview

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

Rumble across the battlefield, one territory at a time

Splash Damage and id are teaming up to create a first-person multiplayer online combat game based on the Quake property. We sat down with Splash Damage owner Paul Wedgwood and one of id's top brass, artist Kevin Cloud, to discuss Enemy Territory: Quake Wars.

Mike Griffin

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

PC

Point of Interest

Splash Damage refers to the damage taken by players in the vicinity of an explosive weapon's point of impact.

Developer: Splash Damage Publisher: Activision

Online: Team Assault Available: Q1 2006



Interview

Paul "Locki" Wedgwood, managing director, Splash Damage
Kevin Cloud, artist, id Software

play: Where does Quake Wars enter in the overall series timeline?

Paul "Locki" Wedgwood: In Quake 2, the humans are retaliating against the Strogg on the planet Stroggos, while in Quake Wars it's actually the original battle of the first Strogg invasion on Earth. You get to participate in that battle just like you would take part in some of the famous battles in a WW2 game.

What kind of technology are the humans using at this point?

Kevin Cloud: The weapons and vehicles you have, as far as the Earth force, are kind of conventional weapons moved up into the future about 50 years or so.

Paul: We're still talking about standard kinetic and explosive weapons, like grenades and rocket launchers, and tanks and jeeps. You'll see with the Earth Defense Force that, although they're still pretty contemporary, they've made some progress. So they have ground-effect technology vehicles and some basic form of reactive camouflage.

And if you play as the Strogg...

Wedgwood: They have much more high-tech weaponry and gadgets. The two sides are very asymmetrical in that respect. This isn't just a re-skinning of the other team with the same damage over time but different ranks of mobility and armor...no, the Strogg are quite distinct. They have a different basis for some of their technology, like Gravitonic Repulsion. We made it very consistent, though. The technology is fairly realistic and there are a couple of nods to future development in the Quake universe...

Cloud: Yeah, we're staying close to the Quake universe. Like the Strogg's use of enemy bodies and how they pull out energy from them to replenish their own health...they can use a downed enemy

as a host too, in this case a spawn host. Those are particular to the Strogg, and we're focusing on that.

How do you balance out these kinds of abilities?

Wedgwood: With the EDF, there's the traditional role of medics healing and reviving teammates. Continuing with what Kevin just said: the Strogg troops

being able to Stroggify the EDF guys and turn them into a spawn location for their team...they could also use the same extractor to suck all the juices from the body and turn it into fuel, which can be handed out as health cells to other members of the team. So the two teams really do have quite different abilities, but they all counter each other nicely.

What's the main game mode people will be playing?

Cloud: If you're familiar with Wolfenstein Enemy Territory, we're taking that type of gameplay concept and moving it over to this environment. So rather than a "game mode," you have military objectives. A map will have a mission, and that mission will be specific to the design of that map. Like most military campaigns, it will

"We decided we wanted to have vehicle physics that were more akin to Gran Turismo or good rally games..."

Paul "Locki" Wedgwood, managing director, Splash Damage



be tied around the notion of capturing ground.

Wedgwood: For example, on the Canyon map you've seen, the principal objective for the EDF at the start of the round is to establish a bigger outpost so they can start deploying loads of equipment. See, when you deploy something like an artillery gun, and you spot a big Skycrane flying overhead with the huge crate...you actually call for that as a player, and it's flown in and deployed so you can attack things on the other side of the map. In that Canyon level, you need to escort your mobile command post to the center of the map.

In this instance, what would Strogg players be up to?

Wedgwood: From the Strogg perspective, they need to get intelligence on everything that's going on and establish defense in the area. So in that kind of scenario, one of the teams could basically be on defense. But because the frontline moves through the map as these territorial sections are taken, you always know exactly where the combat is going on. So you don't have people dissipating all over the map looking for people to kill. When you take that objective and push someone back and claim that territory, we're making sure there's always a consistent method—in terms of interface, HUD and communications—to know precisely what you need to achieve.

Cloud: That's one of the things we're liking about Quake Wars and these focused objectives: they bring the teams together.

What kind of leadership system are you using?

Cloud: We're taking what we had in Wolfenstein, which was a fireteam system, and evolving that into basically a squad leader type of position. We're working towards a context-sensitive system where [the squad leader] can point at an object—and there are some basic common things you can do to that object—and he's able to send that message to his team.

Do certain classes enhance the power of vehicles?

Wedgwood: Bear in mind that unlike most games, the vehicles in Quake Wars aren't just a replacement for your character with different armor, mobility and firepower. Each of our vehicles has a special combat role, so in a sense they can be thought of as being a bit like character classes. For example, the Goliath alien walker can transform itself and hunker down into a more fully armored vehicle with better firing angles. There's nothing like that on the EDF team, you know; they have tanks and stuff. So the way that the Goliath is piloted and the person that operates as the gunner...they might have certain

advantages.

Cloud: We're still working through it. The concern is if you allow classes to heavily alter a vehicle, you lose some reliability in it. Like, if somebody jumps out and another person jumps in, and now the vehicle is something different...

"Yeah, we're staying close to the Quake universe. Like the Strogg's use of enemy bodies and how they pull out energy from them to replenish their own health..."

Kevin Cloud, artist, id Software

What type of vehicle control can players expect?

Cloud: Well, the flying vehicles are really maneuverable. Turns on a dime...Paul and I have been able to do barrel rolls. Almost everything has a driver and a gunner position for support. We're figuring out cooperative controls and communication for vehicles, where the gunner and driver work together to call targets. The nice thing is that if you're in a territory you own, you can actually call in a vehicle and have it dropped to you.

Wedgwood: It's also worth mentioning the physics. We decided we wanted to have vehicle physics that were more akin to Gran Turismo or good rally games, so we worked out a solution with the programmers at id. Our vehicles have suspension, they can do jumps and tricks, and you can roll them. If you jumped into a Strogg vehicle, like the Hornet, let's say: it's got six Gravitonic Repulsors, so the way it reacts to terrain is based on a real model of gravity control.

Are you considering adding persistent stats and rewards?

Wedgwood: We're researching it. In the end, it has to benefit gameplay. You know, you don't want a server full of people with über rocket launchers, and then people join the server and they're completely overwhelmed. Unlike an RPG, like World of Warcraft or something, where you have these distinct areas to go to...if the rewards are worth having, they must ultimately unbalance the game for the people who don't have those rewards. And when you're all competing on the same playing field, that makes the playing field unbalanced.

Cloud: We'll definitely have something similar to the campaign mode in Wolfenstein Enemy Territory, where you have a series of maps that are tied together and a reward system that pays off for the people who work well with their team.

These outdoor maps are huge. How is the Doom 3 engine pulling this off?

Cloud: Splash Damage basically started off with the Doom technology, then worked with us at id to modify it into a major outdoor rendering technology that's completely new.

Carmack's "Megatexture" technology...what's up with that name?

Wedgwood: 'Cause it's a *really* big texture!

Cloud: [laughs] The Megatexture, right. With it, we have this unlimited canvas and a friction detection system across the entire level on the different surfaces of things. So it really determines what routes certain vehicles will take. Some vehicles can go off road and move very quickly, pull off dramatic jumps and things like that. Sometimes tanks are needed. So the friction, combined with these atmospheric effects we've created and new uses for particles...for this type of game, we're doing stuff that nobody else has done before.

Much obliged, gentlemen.



Know your role in combat, whether defending key artillery posts or driving toward the frontlines.



Preview

Black & White 2

Molyneux works miracles in his comfort zone

The original Black & White defied standard categorization: was it a god game, real-time strategy or a creature-raising sim? It was, most ambitiously, all three of these genres rolled up into one. For the sequel, Peter Molyneux and his Lionhead team are bringing back the same range of gameplay while raising the AI and presentation to astonishing new levels. Seriously, the AI of the creature avatar you let loose upon the world (available in several different animal forms) is

so advanced it's to be included in the 2006 Guinness Book of Records. You can teach your creature to play and entertain villagers, help build and expand towns and even lead your armies. The gradations between every significant personality change are incredibly subtle and progressive, aided by growth and alignment morphing (think Fable) and superb animations.

As the "Leader," it's possible to move through most of the game as a peaceful deity, conquering the hearts

and minds of nearby populations by building spectacular, bustling cities filled with happy citizens. Or you might whip your townsfolk (literally) into huge armies and mercilessly conquer other towns, perhaps using your creature as a pacifier in order to calm villagers after you've terrorized them into submission. As per the above examples, Black & White 2 can be played as a god game, RTS or creature sim whenever you feel that's how you want to play. Regardless of the type of worship you elicit from your people, it will generate Tribute. With Tribute, you can buy hundreds of new items ranging from toys for your pet to dazzling miracles and powerful army upgrades. You can even unlock new gesture-based game controls. Surrounding all this depth and gravitas is an aura of light-hearted quirkiness that all Molyneux games seem to possess.

Mike Griffin



Black & White 2

PC

Point of Interest

The game's camera seamlessly zooms from the stratosphere all the way down to ant colonies in the grass.

Developer: Lionhead Studios Publisher: EA Games
Online: Planned for post-release Available: October

Assembling troops is an uncomplicated affair; prepare to witness some rather entertaining

Preview

EverQuest 2: Desert of Flames

Ali Baba and the 60 levels

It's a critical transitional period for SOE and EverQuest 2 this fall, as the game's first full-blown expansion pack, Desert of Flames, arrives in retail and through digital download. EQ2 is a successful MMO by current standards (ie, the game has enough subscribers to be considered profitable), but it hasn't been an easy year for Sony's big franchise sequel, with World of Warcraft decidedly owning the genre. The Desert of Flames expansion pack will throw the gauntlet down. A new level limit of 60—up from 50—will entice high-end players with new progress options; loads of epic encounters across the Desert of Ro will keep guilds occupied for months; and everyone can check out the introduction of PvP gameplay in the

arenas of Arabian fantasy-influenced Maj'Dul. We spent several days exploring the new DoF content in a late Beta version, and it's clear that SOE is building this one to last. The desert landscapes are sprawling and there are surprisingly cool gameplay elements like vertical scaling of walls and cliffs. Mike Griffin

EverQuest 2: Desert of Flames

PC

Point of Interest

Boulder beasts, death knights, skeleton warriors and more will be controllable champions in the new arenas.

Developer: Sony Online Entertainment Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment Online: Massively multiplayer Available: September



Twin dragons of gold and silver soar across the dunes. Here, the silver giant pays a surprise visit to Maj'Dul.



"...loads of epic encounters across the Desert of Ro will keep guilds occupied for months..."

Postscript

The new standard in gaming sound: The X-Fi

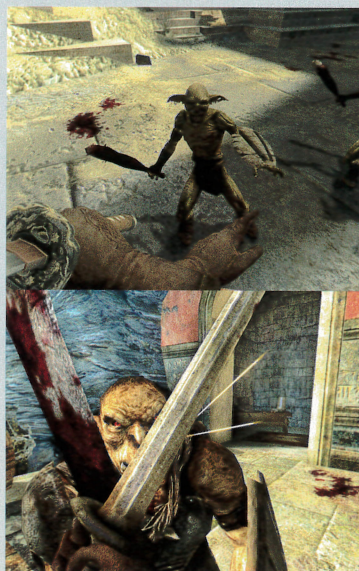
Let's face it: Creative Labs has this market cornered, and we've all been using their Sound Blaster Audigy cards for years. They're reliable and every major title uses EAX for improved effects. When Creative was faced with the decision to provide another incremental Audigy update or jump ahead with a next-gen product, they took a flying leap. The result is the X-Fi. The X-Fi Fatal1ty FPS (named after pro gamer Johnathan Wendel's nickname) we tested is basically the total gaming solution. The next-gen audio processor

combined with an unprecedented 64 megs of RAM actually serves to accelerate a game, as the X-Fi completely offloads sound tasks from your PC's processor. Beyond assisting game performance, the X-Fi does a surprisingly good job cleaning up your MP3s with its 24-bit Crystalizer mode, and its 3D headphone effect creates some of the best positional headphone audio we've ever heard. If you take sound quality seriously in your games and music, the X-Fi is the only way to go.



Ubisoft heralds the Dark Messiah

Following the announcement of the fifth installment of the popular Heroes of Might and Magic strategy-RPG franchise (set for early 2006), Ubisoft has now revealed Dark Messiah of Might and Magic, a hybrid first-person action-RPG. In development at Arkane Studios (Arx Fatalis), Dark Messiah will harness Valve's Source engine to bring the dark fantasy environments of Ashan to life. In addition to fairly standard action-RPG



advancement through melee combos, spell damage and an expanding pool of techniques, Dark Messiah will also ship with a 32-player multiplayer game that includes campaign play and unlockable items.

NPD PC Game Sales

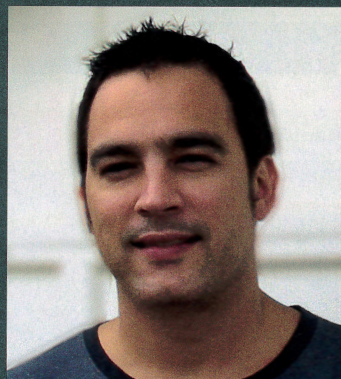
Week of August 14 - August 20, 2005

01. Dungeon Siege 2 - Microsoft
02. Battlefield 2 - EA
03. World Of Warcraft - VU Games
04. Guild Wars - NCsoft
05. Roller Coaster Tycoon 3 - Atari
06. The Sims 2 - EA
07. The Sims Deluxe - EA
08. The Sims 2 University Expansion Pack - EA
09. Half-Life 2 - VU Games
10. Roller Coaster Tycoon 3: Soaked Expansion Pack - Atari

The Mojo Master himself, Paul Steed



Famous for his outspoken role at id during Quake 2 and 3 development, Paul Steed has developed a reputation through the years as a master female character modeler. As Wild Tangent prepares to launch the multiplayer update for its Axe promo-vessel on PC, Mojo Master, Paul tells us about his role in the project.



Interview

Paul Steed, artist, Wild Tangent

play: Where did this female modeling obsession—err, talent—originate?

Paul Steed: Probably Quake 2; that was my first real-time female character. I did the "Crack Whore" model for a contest they had. Nowadays, whenever I give a class—or even in the books I've written—it's a matter of focusing on making a successful female game character and not just because she has large breasts, but because she has a quality to her that makes her memorable. Like what we've done with some Mojo Master girls: we've made them feel girly, yet tough. Those little indefinable things

are hard to get in there unless you've been doing this for a long time.

Mojo Master is essentially an ad campaign for Axe—not really a gamer's game. It's a free download, no less. Why did Wild Tangent commit to this, ahem, full-featured 3D engine? It's one of those situations where we said, "the more the better." I've worked for two years on Xbox now and I have a good idea about polygon limits. So I just picked a magic number: I said, "OK, let's do 6,000 polygons on the girls." In the fall update, for the kind of boss characters I've created, we'll be moving that number up to 9,000. We use a lot of that in the face for animations, and we've gone the extra route of making the new girls really ethnically diverse, with really different responses.

Be honest now Paul: What do you think about this whole Axe promotional business with regards to Mojo Master?

The thing I've always liked about Axe is their understanding of their demographic. Somehow they've done this, like, Starbucks move—where they have this cool-factor to them that everybody has to have. So with the game, we can actually tap into that and count on the players knowing where we're going with the ideas.

Nintendo Entertainment System 20th Anniversary

Celebrating 20 years with the top 20 games

words Chris Hoffman w/ Mike Griffin and the Play staff

It's no stretch to say that if it weren't for the Nintendo Entertainment System, none of us would be doing what we're doing right now; we probably wouldn't be playing console video games, much less reading or writing about them. Following the dramatic crash of the Atari 2600 and the entire video game industry in the mid-'80s, people believed that video games were dead; it was time for the next thing. But a new hope appeared in the form of Nintendo, bringing their 8-bit Famicom system over from Japan repackaged as the Nintendo Entertainment System. Most were skeptical; in fact, it was only when Nintendo included R.O.B., the Robotic Operating Buddy, with the system and marketed it as a toy that a distributor finally agreed to sell it, and then only in the New York area. On October 18, 1985, the NES was released as a set that included the game console, two controllers, the Zapper light gun, R.O.B. and two games, Gyromite and Duck Hunt. A national launch followed in 1986, and a new era in video games began. Now, 20 years later, we celebrate the system that almost single-handedly resurrected video gaming and paved the way for the multi-billion dollar industry it is today with a list of the 20 greatest NES games (as voted on by the Play editors via secret ballot), along with some of the other highs and lows of perhaps the most significant game system ever made.

NES Specs:

CPU: Custom 8-bit Motorola 6502
Processor speed: 1.79 MHz
Display resolution: 256x240
Total colors: 52
Max colors on-screen: 16
Max sprites: 64
Max sprites per line: 8
Sprite size: 8x8 or 8x16
RAM: 2 KB
Video RAM: 2 KB

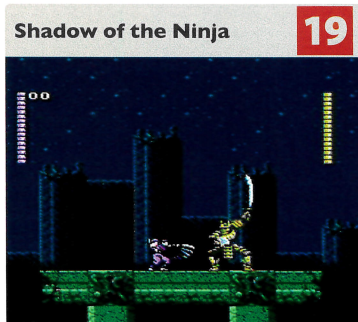
Nintidbit

Games released at or near the NES launch included: Super Mario Bros., Duck Hunt, Baseball, Golf, Tennis, 10 Yard Fight, Donkey Kong Jr. Math, Clu Clu Land, Wrecking Crew, Ice Climber, Kung Fu, Pinball, Excitebike, Mach Rider, Gyromite, Stack-Up, Hogan's Alley and Wild Gunman.



Featuring the action and enemies of its arcade forebear (released a year earlier), Rygar landed on the NES in 1987 with completely different level design that had players seeking out critical items and backtracking to use those items to advance. Rygar's unique weapon, the Diskarmor tethered shield, immediately set it apart from other NES action titles.

Tecmo
1987



Founded by former Konami and Capcom employees, Natsume made a big splash with their debut title, Shadow of the Ninja. The detailed backgrounds and wicked-cool cybernetic enemies looked great for their time, and the power-up system and ability to cling to ceilings allowed for some technique-filled gameplay. The bosses were awesome and co-op mode was fun, if plagued by slowdown.

Natsume
1990



Super C didn't make quite as big an impact as the original Contra did, but it still offered some incredible co-op shoot-'em-up intensity. The graphics were better, the bosses were meaner, the challenge was higher...and the flame weapon was actually useful this time! New top-down stages added even more fun to this Super C-quel.

Konami
1990



The PC version of Maniac Mansion was good, but the NES version was even better. Quirky humor permeated the entire game, from the characters (like talking tentacles) to the items you could obtain (chainsaw, exploded hamster), but it was the variety of methods you could use to solve the mansion's many riddles that made the game worth playing over and over again.

Jaleco
1990



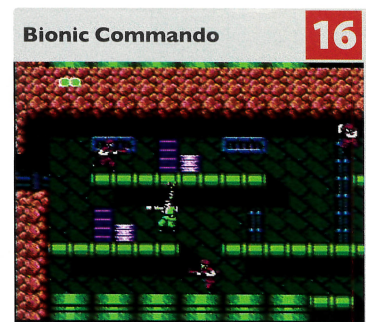
Industry Impressions

Keiji Inafune, producer, Capcom

"This is the original video game machine and it is fondly remembered as providing me many hours of great enjoyment. I was a younger man when the NES made its debut, so I played and enjoyed it a lot. I also created a lot. Those were good days."

Top 5 NES games

1. The Legend of Zelda
2. Super Mario Bros.
3. Dr. Mario
4. Castlevania
5. Bionic Commando



There were a lot of good action-platform games on the NES, but Bionic Commando defied all convention by using a grappling hook in lieu of a jump button. It took some getting used to, but once you had it dialed in, rappelling up ledges and swinging from ceilings simply felt great. RPG-like elements blended with the unique gameplay for a one-of-a-kind experience. How about a modern sequel, Capcom?

Capcom
1988

Kid Icarus

15



Starring the intrepid young Pit, a winged boy on a mission to save the fallen goddess Palutena, Kid Icarus appeared on the NES in 1987. Though Kid Icarus wouldn't match the success of other Gunpei-produced titles like Metroid (whose engine it shared), it garnered a strong core following. The game blends platforming and maze crawling to great effect, and, like Metroid, KI's simple controls feel excellent to this day.

Nintendo
1987

Castlevania

14



The peerless Castlevania series has always thrived on its rich Gothic mood, exceptional music and intimately adventurous castle setting, and this was where it all began. Even in its NES simplicity, the original Castlevania managed to feel excitingly new and visually impressive, creating a game unlike anything we'd ever played before and making an instant icon out of hero Simon Belmont.

Konami
1987

Hardware Highlights

R.O.B.

The Robotic Operating Buddy was one of the NES' selling points at launch, but its mechanical parts didn't always work smoothly and it quickly faded into obscurity. Only two compatible games were ever released: Gyromite and Stack-Up.



Power Pad



Before games like DDR made peripherals like this cool, Nintendo's encouraged gamers to get physical with games like Dance Aerobics and World Class Track Meet. Nintendo's tagline: Now you're playing with power in a whole new way.

Power Glove



In theory, Mattel's Power Glove would let users play any game by using hand gestures, but what sounded kinda neat was horribly awkward in reality. It was even lazier than its appearance in *The Wizard* would lead one to believe.

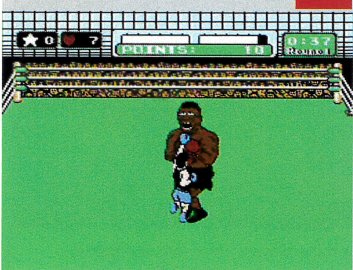
NES Version II



By 1993, 16-bit games were the dominant force on the video game scene, but Nintendo made a final marketing push by releasing a completely redesigned, top-loading NES. Fairly rare, the top-loading NES often sells to collectors for premium prices.

Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!

13



In addition to the massive character sprites, it was the cerebral gameplay that made Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!! so much fun. Defeating each boxer was almost a puzzle in itself—a matter of learning and exploiting each adversary's weakness without kissing the canvas. Note that this is the original NES game with the ear-eatin', wife-beatin' Mike Tyson as the final boss, not the re-released version featuring Mr. Dream.

Nintendo
1987

Contra

12



Adapted from the hit arcade game, Contra practically created a genre unto itself with its unique brand of run-and-gun action. With fantastic power-ups—gotta go with the spread gun—Contra was pattern-based gaming at its finest, and the pseudo-3D stages added some interesting variety to the formula. Two-player mode was awesome as well...except when your partner left you behind on the waterfall stage.

Konami
1988

Ghosts 'n Goblins

11



Tough as nails and evil to the core, Ghosts 'n Goblins was the kind of game that would make you throw your controller in frustration, only to pick it up and try again (after your blood pressure had settled) because it was just that darn good. Even when you thought you'd finally beat the game, you'd have to do it all over again, but it was worth it for the classic ending: "Congratulation, this story is happy end."

Capcom
1986

Nintidbit

Nintendo originally tried to form a partnership that would allow Atari to distribute the NES in America. Reportedly, a dispute over Donkey Kong caused the deal to fall through. Atari execs probably still kick themselves over that one.

Industry Impressions



Koji Igarashi, producer, Konami

"Wow! Congrats, NES, for its 20th anniversary! I have tons of sweet and fond memories! At that time, I was only into PC and arcade games. I was actually making fun of, so to speak, console games. But, I went to my friend's house one time and noticed that NES had the same games I had played at the arcade center. It was sooooo shocking to me! But, I already spent all my money on a PC and had no extra for an NES, regrettably. So instead, I put all my passion towards the PC—I became eager to make a game better than NES. As I look back, I think that was the starting point of my game creation, or as a game creator. A couple years later, I actually was able to purchase an NES."

Top 5 NES games

1. Castlevania
2. Star Luster (Japan only)
3. Solomon's Key
4. The Legend of Zelda
5. [unavailable]

Metal Gear

10



What many people don't know about Metal Gear, directed by Hideo Kojima, is that the game began its life in 1987 on the MSX2 computer. Several elements of the NES/Famicom port (which wasn't produced by Kojima) were changed—some would argue, improved—while the series' patented stealth elements, certainly a fresh concept at the time, began to take shape in hero Solid Snake's covert actions.

Ultra Games (Konami)
1988

Super Mario Bros.

09



You absolutely can't have a best-of list without Super Mario Bros.—arguably the granddaddy of modern console gaming. At the time, concepts like side-scrolling levels and end-of-stage bosses were groundbreaking, and hidden features like Warp Zones were nothing short of brilliant. Without this pack-in, the NES would probably have never attained the heights it did.

Nintendo
1985

Mega Man 2

08



Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune cites Mega Man 2 as his favorite in the series, and that love truly shows through in the game, which took everything from the original and improved it: better graphics, better music, more levels, more gadgets and one of the coolest moments in final boss history. The subsequent Mega Man games weren't bad either, but this is the pinnacle of the series.

Capcom
1989

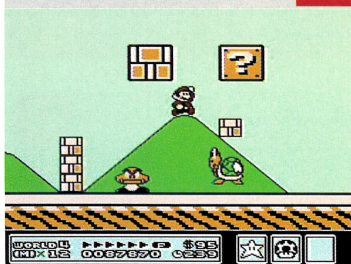
Nintendo Entertainment System 20th Anniversary

Nintidbit

Approximately 678 officially licensed games were released for the NES. A large number of them weren't released in Japan, such as Nintendo's Gumshoe and Capcom's Strider.

Super Mario Bros. 3

06

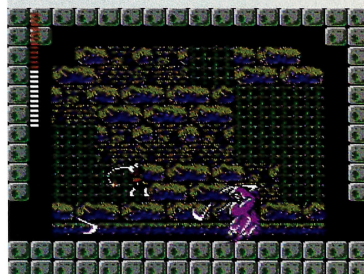


What Nintendo started with the original SMB they arguably perfected with the series' third installment, which included all the mushroom-powered enemy-stomping that players loved, only enhanced with various suits (the raccoon suit for flying, the frog suit for swimming, the tanooki suit for transforming into a statue and all-around kick-assitude) and far more varied level design.

Nintendo
1990

Castlevania II: Simon's Quest

02

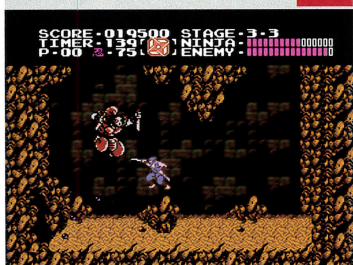


Simon's Quest retained many of the elements that made the original Castlevania so popular—the whip-snapping gameplay, Gothic setting, great music, freakish enemies, special weapons—but rearranged them within a sizeable, nonlinear world and an action-RPG framework that in many ways set the stage for later games like Symphony of the Night. Exploring and unlocking the secrets of the Transylvanian countryside was instantly absorbing, even if it was on the easy side.

Konami
1989

Ninja Gaiden

07



Two things make the original NES Ninja Gaiden legendary: its tremendously challenging gameplay and its revolutionary cutscenes. The inclusion of story sequences between levels was groundbreaking, and helped tremendously in pulling gamers into Ryu Hayabusa's quest for revenge, while the sword-swinging gameplay was as technical as science. We played this one for hours on end to master its nuances.

Tecmo
1989

The Legend of Zelda

03



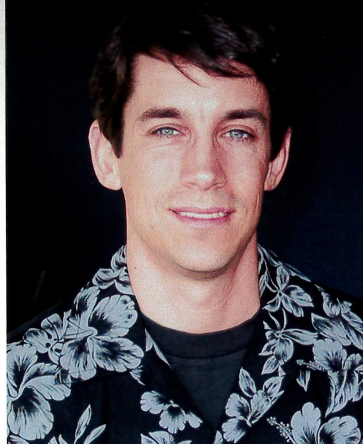
The original Legend of Zelda wasn't just revolutionary—it was a revelation. Zelda presented a perfect mix of exploration, action and puzzles that persists to this day. We spent weeks trying to solve its mysteries, burning every bush or bombing every wall on screen in the hopes of finding one more secret chamber, using graph paper to tirelessly map our progress. Augmented by substantial challenge and unforgettable music, Zelda was a truly landmark title.

Nintendo
1987

Industry Impressions



Ted Price, president, Insomniac Games



"Honestly, I still think that most games today can't touch the brilliance exhibited by Miyamoto's games on the NES. A lot of my own opinions of what makes a game design good or bad were formulated during those years. This doesn't mean that people at Insomniac listen to me, but it's always nice to be able to use those classics as reference if we're having an argument over a basic design question. For example, we referenced the original Metroid a lot when we were building the first Ratchet & Clank. I still look back on those NES days as some of the happiest I've had!"

Top 5 NES games

1. Metroid
2. The Legend of Zelda
3. Zelda II: The Adventure of Link
4. Super Mario Bros.
5. Final Fantasy

Zelda II: The Adventure of Link

05

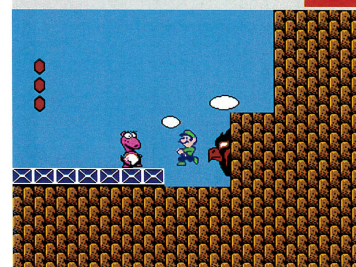


After what seemed like an eternity of waiting, the Zelda sequel finally arrived, but it wasn't quite what some expected. Side-scrolling levels? Magic spells? Experience points? A lives counter? Yes, it was different, but we loved it just the same, as it combined the best aspects of the first Zelda with those of a top-notch action game to create an awesome action-RPG.

Nintendo
1988

Super Mario Bros. 2

04



As most players are aware, the game we know as Super Mario Bros. 2 wasn't originally a Mario title—it featured different characters and was called Doki Doki Panic in Japan—but as it turned out, it was still a great game. Tossing and throwing enemies was a tremendously fun mechanic, and the ability to play as Luigi, Toad and the Princess, each with distinct skills, made it even better.

Nintendo
1988

Metroid

01



The Metroid series is one of very few franchises in gaming history with a near-perfect track record. The source of this long-running winning streak, and Play's top NES game of all time, is Nintendo's original Metroid. The 1986 masterpiece of Game Boy creator Gunpei Yokoi and celebrated designer Yoshio Sakamoto, Metroid revolutionized the action-adventure genre by encouraging progress through non-linearity; players could explore the alien planet of Zebes within an action structure far less rigid (though expertly defined and paced) than any title in the genre at the time. Metroid is also credited for its amazing atmosphere, a feat rarely achieved—with such minimal and affecting conviction—by any 8-bit title, and also for casting the first major game heroine in Samus Aran.

Nintendo
1986

Fortunately, they don't make 'em like this anymore...

Hall of Shame

Marvel's X-Men



The best part of X-Men was how your CPU-controlled partner would usually walk on a damage zone and kill himself seconds after the level began. Clearly he didn't want to play either.

LJN
1989

Contra Force



As great as most of the Contra games have been, there have been some stinkers...like this one. Who makes a Contra game where your gun only fires halfway across the screen? And who names a character "Beans"?

Konami
1992

Hydlide



FCI's Western port of the action-RPG Hydlide landed in 1989, around the same time as Dragon Warrior's release and not too long before Final Fantasy hit. Next to these giants, Hydlide's horribly crude gameplay was embarrassingly inadequate.

FCI
1987

Editors' NES Top 10

Dave Halverson

- 01 Metroid - Nintendo - 1986
- 02 The Legend of Zelda - Nintendo - 1987
- 03 Castlevania II: Simon's Quest - Konami - 1988
- 04 Ninja Gaiden - Tecmo - 1989
- 05 Blaster Master - Sunsoft - 1988
- 06 Battletoads - Tradewest - 1991
- 07 Wizards & Warriors - Acclaim - 1987
- 08 Bionic Commando - Capcom - 1988
- 09 Batman - Sunsoft - 1989
- 10 Ghosts 'n Goblins - Capcom - 1986

Brady Fiechter

- 01 Metroid - Nintendo - 1986
- 02 The Legend of Zelda - Nintendo - 1987
- 03 Castlevania - Konami - 1987
- 04 Bionic Commando - Capcom - 1988
- 05 Super Mario Bros. - Nintendo - 1985
- 06 Super Mario Bros. 2 - Nintendo - 1988
- 07 Rygar - Tecmo - 1987
- 08 Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!! - Nintendo - 1987
- 09 Contra - Konami - 1988
- 10 Zelda II: The Adventure of Link - Nintendo - 1988

Chris Hoffman

- 01 Mega Man 2 - Capcom - 1989
- 02 Super Mario Bros. 2 - Nintendo - 1988
- 03 Zelda II: The Adventure of Link - Nintendo - 1988
- 04 Ninja Gaiden - Tecmo - 1989
- 05 TMNT II: The Arcade Game - Ultra Games - 1990
- 06 Mega Man 3 - Capcom - 1990
- 07 G.I. Joe - Taxan - 1991
- 08 Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!! - Nintendo - 1987
- 09 Castlevania II: Simon's Quest - Konami - 1988
- 10 Shadow of the Ninja - Natsume - 1990

Mike Griffin

- 01 Super C - Konami - 1990
- 02 Metal Gear - Ultra Games - 1988
- 03 The Legend of Zelda - Nintendo - 1987
- 04 Metroid - Nintendo - 1986
- 05 Castlevania II: Simon's Quest - Konami - 1988
- 06 Shadow of the Ninja - Natsume - 1990
- 07 Mega Man 2 - Capcom - 1989
- 08 Ninja Gaiden 2 - Tecmo - 1991
- 09 Heavy Barrel - Data East - 1990
- 10 Super Mario Bros. 3 - Nintendo - 1990

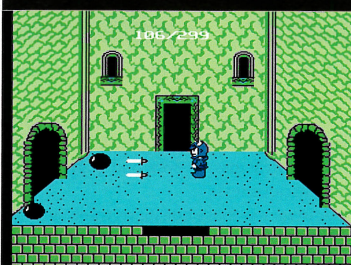
Ashley Esqueda

- 01 Castlevania II: Simon's Quest - Konami - 1988
- 02 Maniac Mansion - Jaleco - 1990
- 03 Ghosts 'n Goblins - Capcom - 1986
- 04 The Goonies 2 - Konami - 1987
- 05 Super Mario Bros. 3 - Nintendo - 1990
- 06 Kid Icarus - Nintendo - 1987
- 07 Metroid - Nintendo - 1986
- 08 Zelda II: The Adventure of Link - Nintendo - 1988
- 09 Super Mario Bros. 2 - Nintendo - 1988
- 10 Final Fantasy - Nintendo - 1990

Michael Hobbs

- 01 Super Mario Bros. - Nintendo - 1985
- 02 The Legend of Zelda - Nintendo - 1987
- 03 Super Mario Bros. 3 - Nintendo - 1990
- 04 Metroid - Nintendo - 1986
- 05 Castlevania - Konami - 1987
- 06 Life Force - Konami - 1988
- 07 Metal Gear - Ultra Games - 1988
- 08 Zelda II: The Adventure of Link - Nintendo - 1988
- 09 Kid Icarus - Nintendo - 1987
- 10 Ghosts 'n Goblins - Capcom - 1986

Deadly Towers



Deadly Towers was a game so disastrous that Nostradamus should have predicted its looming tragedy. Between rage-inducing, quick deaths from blue and green blobs on the screen and tortuously repetitive music, Deadly Towers set the bar for bad games.

Broderbund
1987

Total Recall



Although there were many awful movie-based games in the 8-bit era, Total Recall may be the worst. Apparently, the developers believed the film was all about Arnold fighting off hordes of purple midgets in the drabest of environments.

Acclaim
1990

Nintidbit

The last officially licensed game released for the NES was Nintendo's Wario's Woods in December 1994.

NESurrection

Would you believe that, two decades after its debut, the NES is making a comeback? OK, so it's not truly an NES—it's actually a clone—but Messiah Entertainment's Generation NEX system is designed to help nostalgic gamers return to that era when gameplay was king. Scheduled for release on Sept. 15 and boasting a retro-chic look, Generation NEX is compatible with both NES and Famicom games, supports all NES accessories, and even functions with new peripherals, like wireless controllers. Look for it at retailers like Gamestop and Game Crazy, where it will sell for \$59.99. Hopefully Nintendo's legal department won't have any complaints...



Industry Impressions



George Harrison, senior vice president, marketing and corporate communications, Nintendo of America

"The NES really brought gaming into the mainstream unlike ever before. Arcades had started booming at this point, but the average household still didn't have a convincing reason to invite video games through their front door... Without the NES, today's video game culture would have developed much slower and with much less flavor. Imagine having early black-and-white cartoons without classic Mickey and Donald episodes—the same would be true if the NES had not brought us our favorite classic gaming moments in the 1980s and beyond."

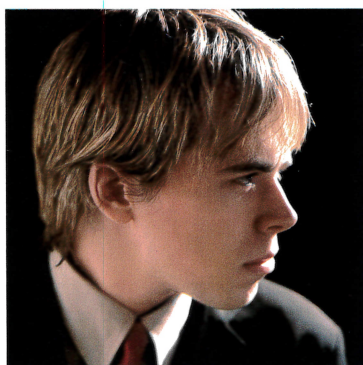
Top 5 NES games

1. Super Mario Bros.
2. The Legend of Zelda
3. Dr. Mario
4. Tecmo Bowl
5. Excitebike

play japan

Welcome to Play Japan, which is sorta like Play, but with a bit more shichimi. We debated long and hard what to debut the section with, and it gradually became apparent that there was only one real choice. If it can be said that a geographical center of the gaming world exists, it would undoubtedly be Akihabara, in Tokyo, Japan. Hopefully this month's feature article on the fabled Electric Town will serve to whet the appetite, for this is only the beginning. Consider this month's edition of Play Japan an hors d'oeuvre, or, if you will, an otsumami of sorts. From next month the section will be heavily expanded, including a report on Comic Market (Japan's largest otaku convention), reviews, previews, and sales charts for games, anime, and J-Pop. Looking further into the future, you can expect plenty of exclusive interviews, event reports, and features, all with a uniquely Japanese slant. Without further ado, we introduce your hosts, Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama.

Bio Nick Des Barres



Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)," but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly 20 years and writing about them for 11.

Having dabbled in various branches of gaming over the last decade, including but not limited to strategy guides (too numerous to count), PlayStation1 and 2 package and manual design (Guilty Gear, Hidden Invasion), RPG translation (Valkyrie Profile, Shadow Hearts) and even the theatrical release poster for the film version of *Resident Evil*, he now finds himself returning to his roots: the realm of print media. Nick (known in some circles as "Blue Shadows"), whose writing has in previous years been simultaneously cherished and reviled, hopes to continue provoking debate in his new role as Play's Japanese correspondent, not for the sake of controversy

itself, but in an effort to challenge the mores and givens of an industry increasingly driven by cruise-control.

As far as his gaming proclivities are concerned, it is the classic genres of his youth that most please him—RPGs, action/adventure, shooting. While he can certainly appreciate the radically new, the fact remains that, to use a current example, he would always choose Dawn of Sorrow over Curse of Darkness, and he still doggedly insists the PC Engine was the best game system of all time. Deep, pseudophilosophical discussions on the nature of video games and whether or not they have intrinsic artistic value are of no interest to him—such masturbatory discourse leads nowhere, and eventually one will find himself unable to see the forest for the Deku Tree. Now living in the Land of the Rising Sun, which is to say Cipangu, which is to say Zipang, which is to say Nippon, which is presumably to say Japan, he has identified three specific goals to pursue there: 1) to make Ami Onuki of Puffy his wife; 2) to visit the grave of Gunpei Yokoi, burn incense and clap his hands; and 3) to bring readers of Play the most compelling, thought-provoking and downright blissful coverage of the Japanese gaming scene possible.

Top 5 anime

1. Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind
2. AKIRA
3. Grave of the Fireflies
4. My Neighbor Totoro
5. My Youth in Arcadia

Top 5 manga

1. Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind
2. Jojo's Bizarre Adventure
3. The Five Star Stories
4. Dr. Slump
5. Sexy Commando Gaiden: Sugoi Yo!! Masaru-San

Top 5 J-Pop

1. Puffy AmiYumi
2. Love Psychedelico
3. Ringo Shiina
4. the brilliant green
5. The Tigers

Top 5 games

1. The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
2. Policenauts
3. Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike
4. AZEL: Panzer Dragoon RPG
5. Biohazard 4

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, shooters
Now playing: Grandia III
Favorite game character: Kionoa

Bio Dai Kohama



Dai found himself sitting at his desk, mired in his boring job, considering the futility of his own existence. Sighing deeply, his vision was suddenly obscured, as though a blindfold had been drawn across his eyes, and gradually he lost consciousness.

"Answer me these questions three, and you shall be released," intoned a voice in fluent yet slightly accented Japanese. Dai was unable to move—indeed, could not even ascertain what type of environment he might be in. With a sudden panicky thought that he would be unable to feed his poor cat that night, he could only nod assent.

"What is your history as a gamer?" he was asked.

"The first game I ever played was probably Space Invaders, though it wasn't until grade school that I began to truly appreciate them. The Famicom was very significant in my life. So how long have I been playing video games? Let's just say I could probably count the days I *haven't* played a video game over the last 20 years on one hand."

Favorite genres: Action, shooting, RPG, other
Now playing: Jump Superstars
Favorite game character: Gallon (J. Talbain)

Top 5 games

1. Radiant Silvergun
2. Vampire: Darkstalkers Collection
3. Kionoa: The Door to Phantomile
4. Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
5. Ultima Online

"Very well. Describe your personal feelings about video games."

"I regret to tell you that's impossible. All I can say is that if video games happened to be human, I would have no choice but to lovingly whisper 'I love you' in their collective ear."

"I see. Lastly tell me this: What *are* video games? Can they reach the status of art, or are they merely playthings?"

"Games to me are like oxygen. I find it impossible to believe that there are people who object to the describing of games as art. I remember very vividly first seeing the crystals in Life Force as a child and being moved by the exquisite arrangement of pixels. I get the same feeling today when I gaze upon a work of fine art. Are games 'merely' playthings? I don't understand this application of the word 'merely.' How could play possibly be 'mere?'"

And with that, the veil was lifted from Dai's eyes, and he was not entirely surprised to find an American youth standing before him. "Welcome to Play magazine!" exclaimed the foreigner. Dai was suddenly overcome with emotion. Indeed, he had never before felt such joy, such jubilation, such glee...for a quick glance at the calendar revealed that today was the day his local supermarket had a sale on cat food!

Top 5 anime

1. Ghost in the Shell
2. The Vision of Eshflowne
3. Turn-A Gundam
4. Digimon Adventure
5. Meitantei Holmes/Sherlock Hound

Top 5 manga

1. Honey & Clover
2. Jojo's Bizarre Adventure
3. FullMetal Alchemist
4. Ashiarai-Tei No Jumin-Tachi
5. Nemu the Girl

Top 5 J-Pop

1. Yoko Kanno & Maaya Sakamoto
2. Bump of Chicken
3. Sunee Hair
4. Pornograffiti
5. Kokia



The Beginner's Guide To

Akihabara

words Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama

Muslims have Mecca. Buddhists have Bodhi Gaya. Film stars have Rodeo Drive. Otaku...have Akihabara. Inarguably the largest conglomeration of electronic, computer, game and anime shops on Earth, Akihabara, conveniently located smack-dab in the middle of greater Tokyo, is the ultimate site of pilgrimage for the true die-hard game fan. You want a Hi-Saturn Navi? Bandai Playdia? Unopened copy of Galactic Policewoman Legend Sapphire? They're all here...if you know where to look. And, of course, if you have the yen to spend a lot of yen; a first-timer is likely to walk away after a day's furious shopping madness with a two-to-three-thousand-dollar-sized hole burned in his pocket.

And that's where this article comes in. We want to help you relieve yourself of that burdensome cash clogging up your bank account. What else are you going to spend it on? Shelter? Sustenance? What do you *really* need to survive? You need a sealed copy of Princess Tomato In Salad Kingdom, don't you? How can you continue to live without a Dreamcast RX-78 Custom? A collection of Lilith and Morrigan dojins? A life-size mannequin of Rei Ayanami? Well, you can't...

so you're just going to have to get yourself on a plane and go to Tokyo. Play in hand.

First, a little history. Akihabara, which the cool kids contract to Akiba (as will I for the remainder of this article, because, let's face it, we're all cool kids here), isn't really Akihabara at all. It's part of Soto-Kanda, Chiyoda ward, and the real Akihabara, meaning "Field of

"...the largest conglomeration of electronic, computer, game and anime shops

Autumn Leaves," lies a few kilometers off in Taito. So why is it "Akihabara Electric Town"? Dunno. Go figure. In any case, the region now known as Akiba was once a bustling lower-class samurai community. It was said at the time, "Fire and brawls are the flowers of Edo (modern Tokyo)," and nowhere was this more manifest than Akiba—its poorly-constructed wooden houses were frequently plagued by fires. Following a devastating 1869 blaze in nearby Kanda, the region was cleared of buildings and established as a firebreak for the Imperial Palace, which is situated to

the southwest. Before long, trees began to grow around the field (perhaps giving rise to the name Akihabara), and a shrine to Akiba Daigongen, a deity who protects against fire, was built.

Akiba took its great leap forward in 1890, when the railway was extended from Ueno and easy access became possible. Although things stayed much the same until after World War II, it was ultimately the train tracks that transformed the sleepy Field of Autumn Leaves into consumer electronics ground zero. Immediately after the war, a huge black market for ham radio and electronics components sprung up, with hundreds of vendors in rickety stalls clustered beneath the tracks hawking vacuum tubes and oscilloscopes of dubious provenance. It was only a matter of time until the businesses became legitimized, a process which continued through the '50s. In fact, some of the largest megashops in Akiba today, such as Laox and Yamagiwa, originated during the period. The '60s—in Japan, the age of the "3Cs" (color TV, cooler [air conditioning], car), not to mention the era in which overseas sales of Japan-made electronics began to mushroom—was when Akiba really began

to resemble its current self, and by the late '80s it was estimated that a full 10 percent of all electronics sold in Japan were purchased there.

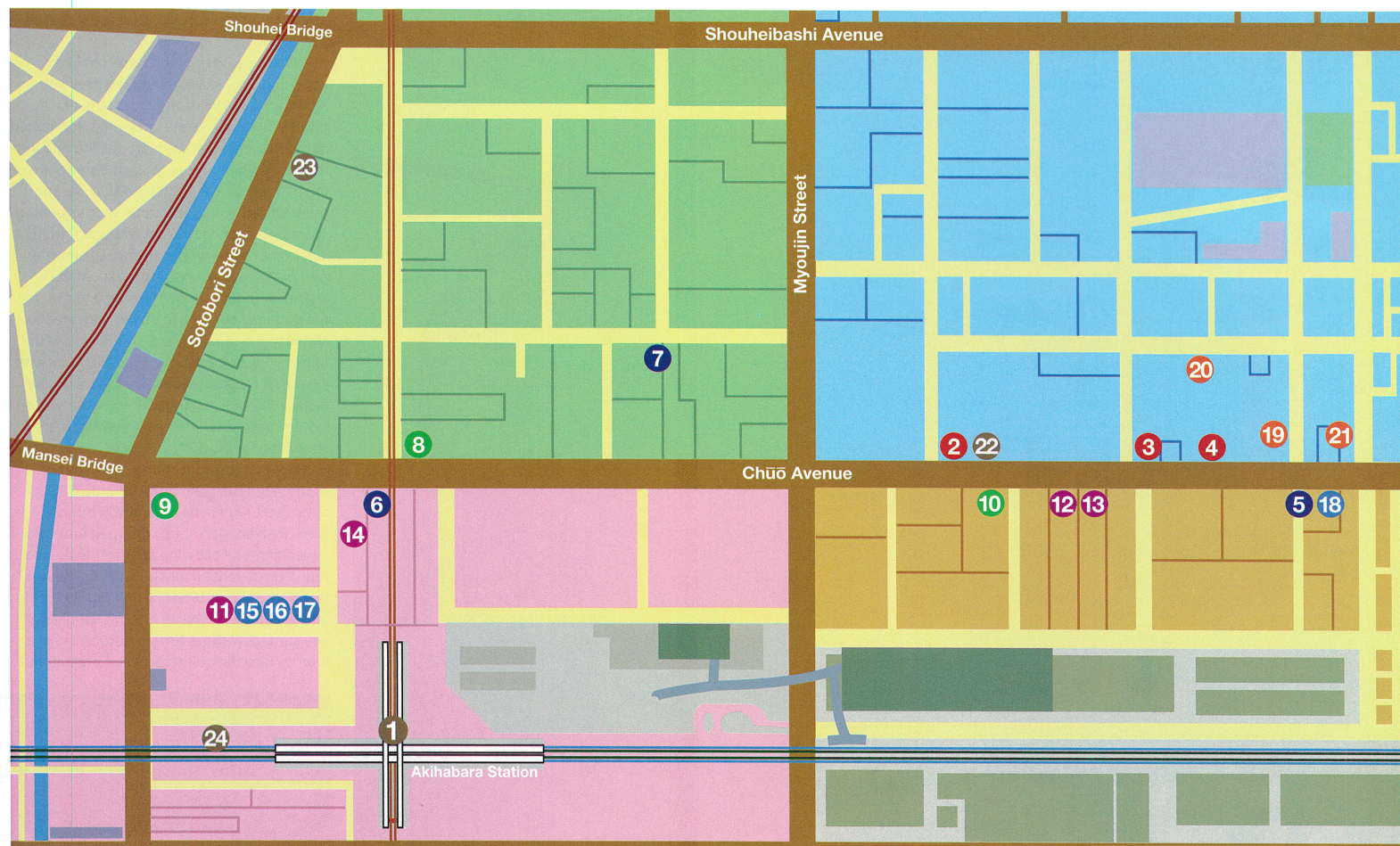
With the advent of the Famicom in the early/mid '80s, Akiba reinvented itself yet again, with a significant percentage of ground-floor real estate becoming dominated by video games. Yet through the '90s and into the new millennium, video game shops are increasingly on the decline, with more and more anime, hobby and dojin shops opening seemingly every day. What was once strictly electronics has now become a neon-pastel pop pastiche of everything otaku. Akiba is ever-changing: Though the shrine to the fire god may be gone (it's been relocated to Matsugatani in Taito ward, should you wish to pay your respects), the area still burns with an almost religious fervor. Try to visit on the release day of a major game, or better yet, a system, and wonder at the lines of gamers stretching for blocks.

Now that the educational stuff's out of the way, I'll explain how this article is structured. On the next page you'll find a map of Akiba, with shops grouped into color-coded genres. Following are short looks at a few of my favorite haunts...and I do mean a few. Space simply won't permit profiles of all 500-plus stores in Akiba, but this should get you started. Without further ado, let's take a journey into the quintessence of otakudom...

Shopping in Akihabara

First things first: How are you gonna get there? I don't mean Japan...you're on your own for that. Once you're in Tokyo, however, just hop on the Yamanote line and get off at Akihabara station. Take the "Akihabara Electric Town" exit and prepare for a *serious* assault on the senses. Akihabara station is also serviced by the Chuo and Keihin-Tohoku train lines, as well as the Hibiya and Suehirocho subway lines.

And how does one shop? It's really quite simple: Select your merchandise, approach the counter and pay. Don't expect anyone to speak English. Most clerks will understand a smattering, and the huge megastores will have fluent speakers, but this article concentrates more on the smaller, otaku-focused shops. There's really only one thing to keep in mind, and that is to *never* hand cash directly to the cashier. Hand-to-hand contact is for filthy barbarians. Look closely; there will always be a small tray on the counter for you to place your yen in, and from which you will also receive your change. Most of the large(r) shops also accept major credit cards, but there will usually be a small markup added. A final word on shopping: Occasionally, you'll get a clerk who will ask you if you have a Japanese system, or if the voltage in your home country is compatible—just nod and smile. Nod. Smile. Nod. Smile. These are your weapons; study and understand them.



Akihabara NAVIGATOR

Longitude 139.767°
Latitude 35.7°

List of color coding/shop names for map

New Games	Figures/Toys/Models
Used & Retro Games	Other
Arcades	Where To Eat & Akihabara Station
Game & Anime Goods	

- 1: Akihabara Station
- 2: Yamagiwa SOFT
- 3: Sofmap
- 4: Messe Sanoh
- 5: Liberty (Used Games)
- 6: Media Land
- 7: Super Potato
- 8: Club Sega
- 9: Sega Gigo
- 10: Taito S@Y
- 11: K-Books
- 12: Tora No Ana
- 13: Animate
- 14: Gamers

- 15: Yellow Submarine
- 16: Kaiyodo
- 17: Volks
- 18: Liberty (Toy & Hobby)
- 19: Cure Maid Café
- 20: Real Vana'diel
- 21: MAK Japan
- 22: Mister Donut
- 23: Denny's
- 24: Becker's

What is dojin?

Dojin: An innocent celebration of one's favorite series? A perversion of all that is sacred? That's for the reader to decide. A phenomenon possible only in Japan for various reasons to be discussed below, "dojin" literally means "same person," but is essentially untranslatable. The word originally referred to friend(s) who share similar interests, but has now come to encompass an entire world of self-published comics, games, music and goods, often but not always based on an existing "official" work. The very definition of the word itself has become altered in the modern Japanese language, much as a standoffishly polite word for "you," *otaku*, has taken on a meaning synonymous with the English "geek." No parallel for "dojin" exists in English, save perhaps for the terms "fanzine" and "fanfic." A broad example of a typical dojinshi, or dojin comic: Kasumi and Ayame from the Dead or Alive series getting it on. A less typical example: an intense, philosophical examination of the deep platonic friendship between

Red and Blue from Gunstar Heroes. In the world of dojin, anything is possible, if not probable. Hundreds of thousands of works are published yearly, based on an unimaginable variety of anime, manga, games, movies, novels, pop groups, you name it—almost anything is fair game.

Almost. A huge percentage of dojin works are inarguably porn, and while the vast majority of companies casually let them slide by, presumably subscribing to the notion that an increased fanbase will inevitably result in increased sales, a few firms have at times become litigious. The most (in)famous example is probably the 1999 case of Nintendo taking the extreme measure of having the female author of a Pokémon dojinshi arrested for copyright

"No parallel for 'dojin' exists in English, save perhaps for the terms 'fanzine' and 'fanfic.'"

Individual shop descriptions:



Akihabara Station

01

Train tickets

The gateway to paradise: This is the view you'll see upon taking the "Akihabara Electric Town" exit. Take a sharp right for the main drag, Chuo Dori. On your left, you'll notice the Radio Kaikan building, and on the right, Gamers, but I'd suggest exercising patience and visiting them on your return trip.

<http://www.akiba.or.jp/english/access/>



infringement. Although her manga portrayed Ash and Pikachu in a rather familiar relationship, such territory isn't even vaguely off-limits in the world of dojin (as any countless number of pornographic Digimon, Sonic and Klonoa dojinshi published regularly can attest), and why Nintendo singled this particular woman out is unclear. In any case, the incident backfired, casting a major-media spotlight on an element of fandom Nintendo would probably have preferred not to be revealed. The author paid a fine (in addition to being kicked out of her apartment and fired from her job), but essentially proved that in Japan, dojin is not prosecutable.

Its roots are simply too deep. One would be hard-pressed to find a professional manga artist who hasn't at least flirted with dojin, and indeed a great many, such as the all-female group CLAMP (Magic Knight Rayearth, Card Captor Sakura, Chobits) are prominently known as having begun their careers as dojin authors. Some, such as distinguished illustrator Nobuteru Yuki (Record of Lodoss War, Vision of Escaflowne, Chrono Cross), even continue to self-publish derivative dojinshi from their own works. On the other hand, dojin will itself occasionally reverse direction and go mainstream: The tremendously popular dojin fighting game Melty Blood, itself based on candidate-for-

most-successful-dojin-game-of-all-time Tsukihime, has recently been given an official arcade release on Sega's Naomi platform.

In addition to these and other factors, such as Japan's lenient intellectual copyright laws and the stunning amount of rank-and-file workers in creative industries such as games and anime that find self-expression through their dojinshi, there is a fundamental difference in Japanese society that contributes much to the atmosphere in which erotic dojin works can exist—a lack of Westernized "modesty" over human sexuality. Imagine for a moment what would happen if someone tried to publish a work of pornographic fiction between, say, Ron and Hermione in America. Religious groups, the PTA, CNN...it would be over in an instant, the hammer of American justice brought down hard.

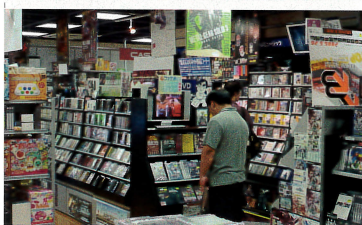
In truth, a great deal of original creators, while perhaps not actively encouraging dojin, are quite positive about its effect and indeed flattered by the borrowing of their characters. A sort of bi-directional, symbiotic (if not to say parasitic) relationship exists between the two worlds—official works spawn dojin works, which support the official works which support the dojin works. If the final outcome is simply increased fan love, who can say it's a bad thing?



Yamagiwa SOFT

02

New games, game music CDs, new anime DVDs and CDs, game and anime goods, etc.



Yamagiwa is an excellent place to get a feel for what Akiba is all about: seven floors of otaku goodness. Everything sold here can be found elsewhere (and usually cheaper), but it's a good introduction to the atmosphere. A sudden trip to, say, Super Potato might induce severe heart palpitations resulting in sudden death, so I'd recommend easing yourself into things.

<http://www.yamagiwasoft.com/>



Sofmap

03

New and used games, new and used anime DVDs, toys, etc.

Sofmap has a total of fifteen (!) shops scattered about Akiba, ranging from digital theater to an all-Mac store, but we're concentrating on the main shop, also featuring seven floors of wonderment. The third floor is where the action is: used retro games. There are plenty of great bargains to be had here, and since the Japanese treat their games so reverently, "used" basically equals "brand-new, but without the shrinkwrap."

<http://www.sofmap.com/>



Messe Sanoh

04

New games



Messe Sanoh is a chain with six stores in Akiba, including one devoted entirely to the "Boys' Love" genre (tales of romantic love between beautiful boys, aimed at women). This is the main shop, which sells all types of games but skews towards genres off the beaten path: love simulations, shooters, etc. The groovy thing about Messe Sanoh is that most games you buy will come with an exclusive trinket only available here: telephone cards, art books, original CDs and the like.

<http://www.messe-sanoh.co.jp/>

Akihabara NAVIGATOR



Liberty (Used Games)

05

Used games



Liberty is yet another chain with a total of seven stores in Akiba, but this article will only cover two of them. This is the used game outlet: A veritable Valhalla of reasonably-priced "used" (again, most second-hand games purchased in Akiba will be indistinguishable from a new copy) software. The ground floor is current-generation, and upper floors are retro.

<http://www.rakuten.co.jp/liberty/>



Media Land

06

New and used games



Ah, Media Land. The memories. Ten years ago, this shop was cryptically known as "Z," and was quite simply the shop in Akiba for hyper-rare software, hardware and game memorabilia. Here, for instance, is where I purchased my copy of Phantasy Star for the Japanese Master System, new in box. Though supplanted in recent years by Super Potato in terms of sheer razor-sharpness, Media Land still has plenty of rare treasures to be gleaned.

<http://www.m-land.co.jp/>



Club Sega, Sega Gigo, Taito S@Y

08~10

Arcades

If any single business can represent the massive changes that have occurred in Akiba during the last decade, it is the arcades. The fact that Club Sega, its sister arcade, Sega Gigo, and Taito S@Y (pronounced "Say-At") continue to survive is somewhat startling given the fact that the number of major arcade games released in a year can now be counted on one hand. I recall fondly my first visit to Akiba, being struck dumb by the necksnapping reality of a seven-story tall arcade. It's probably safe to say that the fighting game glory days of the mid-'90s, when the ground floor of these arcades were dominated by literally 50 Virtua Fighter 2 machines, will never return—the venues are but shadows of their former selves. Though most arcades in Japan now devote the majority of their floor space to UFO Catchers, prize and medal machines, Print Club and the like, Club Sega makes this concession only on its ground floor—the rest is games, games, games, old-school style. The third floor is particularly nice: 2D fighting games and naught else. You'll still find the hardest of the hard duelists in Japan facing off on Super Street Fighter II X, Street Fighter III 3rd Strike and Vampire Savior here. Sega Gigo and S@Y are perhaps less radical, but more representative of what modern arcades in Japan are like: prize machines, music and dance games, golf sims, girl games.

Club Sega: <http://location.sega.jp/cgi-bin/seek2/database.cgi?cmd=dp&DataNum=2121030>

Sega Gigo: <http://location.sega.jp/cgi-bin/seek2/database.cgi?cmd=dp&DataNum=2121130>

Taito S@Y: <http://www.taito.co.jp/shisetsu/space/299.html>



Super Potato

07

Treasures



Quite simply the most hard-core purveyor of video games on the planet Earth. We're talking *diamond-hard*. We're talking *hard enough to cut glass*. Welcome to Super Potato, where anything and everything is possible. Perhaps you'd like a brand-new red-and-white Twin Famicom. Not quite your thing? An unopened copy of Mansion of Insmouth for the VirtualBoy? No? Donkey Kong Hockey Game & Watch? PC Engine LT? Dead of the Brain I & II, the final game ever released for PC Engine? All Night Nippon Super Mario Bros., of which only 3,000 copies were made? Yes indeed, all this and more is possible. So just how super is this particular potato? Let's put it this way: If Super Potato had been established in 1845 Ireland instead of 21st century Japan, there would have been no famine, there would have been no mass exodus, and America as we know it would not exist.

<http://www.superpotato.com/>





K-Books 11

Comics, artbooks, magazines, etc.

If it's otaku-related and it's printed on paper, it's at K-Books: magazines and books on anime, games, toys, models, voice actors and especially manga—K-Books boasts an inventory of 50,000 titles. From a guide on fashion coordination in Final Fantasy XI: Online to the latest issue of Charge!! Cromartie Highschool, it's all here. K-Books also carries a range of dojinshi, but if you're into that sort of thing, Tora No Ana has a much wider selection. (K-Books shares a building with stores 15, 16, and 17. See below for more.)

<http://www.k-books.co.jp/>



Tora No Ana 12

Comics, dojinshi, dojin goods, etc.

Tora No Ana can be thought of as K-Books with the emphasis shifted almost entirely onto printed material, for, shall we say, the more mature manga connoisseur. Tora No Ana ("Tiger Hole", a moniker fairly pregnant with meaning) actually has three stores in Akiba alone; we'll be concentrating on the main one. Plenty of officially-published comics are on offer, but far more interesting are the three floors of fan-produced dojinshi. It should be noted, however, that only the most mainstream of genres will be found here.

<http://www.toranoana.co.jp/>



Animate 13

Anime, manga and game goods, etc.



You're just dying for a FullMetal Alchemist cushion? Can't survive without a replica of Naruto's headband? Need a Tenjiho Tenge folding fan? Sailor Moon wig? Life-sized Sgt. Frog plush? You've come to the right place. The flabbergasting array of licensed products based on your favorite series available at Animate will make your head spin: This goes way beyond the posters, cards and CDs you're probably used to back home.

<http://www.animate.co.jp/>



Gamers 14

Game, anime, and manga goods, etc.

Gamers is sort of like Animate with the power balance tilted towards products based on games (Leon's leather jacket, Cloud's silver wolf accessories, figures and posters and towels and business card holders of untold variety), though anime and manga items are certainly not in short supply. Indeed, one could easily decorate their entire home with goods purchased exclusively from Animate and Gamers. If one were so inclined. And if they had a lot of cash.

<http://www.broccoli.co.jp/gamers/>



Yellow Submarine, Kaiyodo, and Volks 15~17

Toys, figures, garage kits, models



These three hobby venues are clustered inside the storied (in more ways than one) Radio Kaikan building, though one would be hard-pressed to find a radio anywhere near it today. Instead, you'll find lots and lots of otaku dreams made touchably three-dimensional. We speak, of course, of figures, toys, and models. From the latest Master Grade *Gundam SEED* Destiny kit to classic favorites like Chun-Li garage kits, Yellow Submarine, Kaiyodo and Volks will hook you up.

Yellow Submarine: <http://www.yellows submarine.co.jp/>

Kaiyodo: <http://www.kaiyodo.co.jp/>

Volks: <http://www.volks.co.jp/>



Akihabara NAVIGATOR



Liberty (Toy & Hobby) 18

New and used toys, figures, garage kits, models



Another multi-story shop in the Liberty chain, this branch carries everything from new-in-box '70s Chogokin robots (get ready to pay a pretty penny) to thousands upon thousands of slightly marked-up shokugan, or candy toys, helpfully pre-opened so you can see what's inside and complete your collection with ease. There are actually two Liberty used and classic toy shops in Akiba; be sure to also visit the second one a bit further down the main drag.

<http://www.rakuten.co.jp/liberty/>



Real Vana'diel 20

Net café



If you don't know what Vana'diel is, you can skip this. If you do, all you need to know is they have real-life Mithras here, a full-scale walk-in replica of the San d'Orian Moghouse and plush Mandragoras for sale. Real Vana'diel is a 24-hour-a-day net café operated by Square-Enix with one option: play Final Fantasy XI: Online. On the fastest computers that exist. Or projected on a giant screen. Oh, and did we mention they have real-life Mithras?

<http://www.realvanadiel.jp/>



MAK Japan 21

New and used arcade PCBs



Only in the hyper-compartmentalized culture of Japan could such a shop as MAK Japan exist: It sells new and classic arcade boards. To hobbyists. For thousands of dollars (although there are plenty of bargains to be had, too). Not for the faint of heart, collecting arcade PCBs may be seen as some by extreme. But who wants the PS2 port of Street Fighter III 3rd Strike when they could have the real thing? Why, that would be like playing chess on a \$1.99 plastic board from Pic-N-Save when one could be using a jewel-encrusted, gold-and-platinum set.

<http://www.mak-jp.com/>



Mister Donut, Denny's, and Becker's

22-24

Familiar, safe, American-style dining



You gotta eat, right? And you don't wanna stray too far from Chuo Dori and get lost, right? If so the options are sorely limited, because floor space is at a premium, and, well, people want their otaku goods. Denny's and Becker's offer the sort of bland American-style fare you might expect, so unless you absolutely must have a hamburger, I'd suggest ditching "real" food for the day and saying konnichiwa to some sweet, sweet donuts. The Akiba Mister Donut is legendary as a meeting place and general gathering spot, and sitting down at a window seat on the second floor with a cup of coffee and a Brown Sugar Pon De Lion after a hard day's shopping in Akihabara is truly one of life's greatest pleasures.

Mister Donut: <http://www.misterdonut.jp/>

Denny's: <http://www.dennys.co.jp/>

Becker's: <http://www.jefb.co.jp/beckers/>



Cure Maid Café

19

Delicacies

After a wearying day of walking around Akiba toting hundreds of pounds of new purchases, what would you most like to do? 1) Get back to your hotel, take a shower, rest? 2) Shop some more? 3) Have beautiful women dressed as Victorian maids serve you dainties and sweetmeats in a sophisticated yet somehow nostalgic atmosphere reminiscent of a 19th century European gentlemen's parlor? If you answered 3, get thee to Cure Maid Café. If only they let us take pictures.

<http://www.curemaid.jp/>





play anime



Ghost in the Shell Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig

Downloading commencing... I'm in

Like a sacred rite of passage, the opening credits of *2nd Gig* (performed ethereally, once again, by Origa) roll by, somehow matching the sanctity of the former series' dreamy CGI overture, utilizing a combination of traditional 2D and rendered elements to download us into its consciousness, leaving no question that what follows is going to be utterly captivating, as the postscript to one of the greatest sci-fi series of a generation gets underway.

What network shows like *CSI* and *Law & Order* are to regular folks, *Ghost in the Shell* is to anime and discerning sci-fi fans. The precursor to *2nd Gig*, with *Stand Alone Complex*, what began as a cerebral look at the plight of cyber-entities became less about psychogenic sensibleness and more about a plausible distant future where one's memories, or "ghost," might be downloaded into a humanoid "shell" (and subsequently jacked by the lovely Major Motoko Kusanagi if you get out of hand), and the people (to use the term loosely) assigned to police them. Aside from the residual threads and ultimate closure of the Laughing Man case, *SAC* was more detective story than cerebral barrage, putting a discernible face on the plight of covert anti-terrorist unit Public Security Section 9.

As *2nd Gig* opens, one such terrorist group, The Individual Eleven, has taken civilian hostages, placing the new (attractive female) Prime Minister in a precarious spot. Lucky for her, Chief Aramaki is right there, hair in full bloom, to give the order once the pencil-pushers get the authorization to send in Section 9...or not. Ultimately, it all boils down to Motoko, Batou, Togusa and company neutralizing the terrorists without a single casualty inside of 10 minutes or the chief taking a big fall. If they succeed, Section 9 gets new funding and recruits, and we need them for the next episode, so failure is not an option. It's always fun watching Section 9 work, but the real treat here is a symbolic descent that will put a smile on every last *Ghost* fan's face. Dave Halverson

Ghost in the Shell: SAC 2nd Gig

Volume: 1

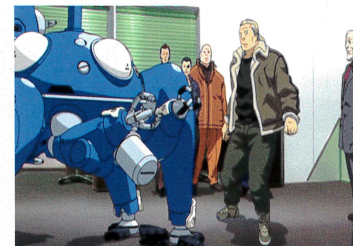
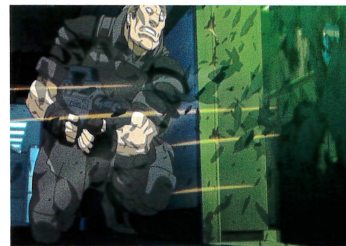
9.5
Score

Production I.G. does for series anime what Seinfeld did for sitcoms. Everything here is elevated.

The only thing that keeps it from a 10 is that I know the best is yet to come.

Released by: Manga/Bandai Ent. Rating: 13 and up

Running Time: 100 minutes Available: September



"...the postscript to one of the greatest sci-fi series of a generation gets underway."



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— Play Magazine

SCORE: 9.5 (OUT OF 10)

— Play Magazine

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Mars Daybreak

Volume 1

Released by: Bandal Entertainment Rating: 13 and older Running Time: 125 minutes Available: September

● Huge ensemble cast and parallel storylines keep things interesting. Production values are considerably high for a
✗ I'm not feeling the talking cat or dolphin in the diving suit.

8.0
Score

Paul Verhoven's *Total Recall* painted an indelible picture of Mars: the red planet; a vacuum-sealed urban Habitrail of subterranean slums under eerie red skies; outside, an atmospheric microwave oven; inside, an inescapable totalitarian quagmire. Apparently, the creators of *Mars Daybreak* (Sony Computer Entertainment Inc.) didn't see *Total Recall* and must have ditched astronomy class altogether, because this version of Mars is covered in—wait for it—water, below a thick layer of ice...under cloudy blue skies. Welcome to Mars...*Daybreak*.

Gram River is a typical citizen of Mars, scraping to get by in the depressed economy by driving loaders, whatever, to support his and his friends' meager existence. An oppressed society under Earth's colonial rule with steep tariffs on its chief exports, the basic necessities like food come at a steep price. But like all underdog anime heroes, life is about to take a dramatic turn. Outside the confines of the city-ships, noble pirates troll the waters, stealing valuable commodities from the hierarchy by crashing the docks and then selling them back to the regular people at cheap prices. During one such smash and grab, Gram is knocked unconscious and snatched from a watery

grave by a passing RB (undersea giant robots called Round Bucklers) and, after some bold maneuvering, reeled in by the notorious Ship of Aurora—the baddest pirates in the sea. A natural-born pilot and opportunist, Gram takes to the pirate's life like a fish to water, much to the chagrin of his childhood gal-pal, the lovely Vestemona Lauren, part of an elite squad of Earth cadets brought to Mars to stop the Aurora. Lovely CG, crisp 2D animation and bold character design in tow, *Mars Daybreak* is off to an extraordinary maiden voyage. Dave Halverson



Vestemona contemplates the struggles ahead...torn between her duty and her feelings for Gram.



"this version of Mars is covered in—wait for it—water, below a thick layer of ice..."



Kakurenbo: Hide and Seek

OVA

Released by: Central Park Media Rating: 13 and up Running Time: 25 minutes Available: October

● Repeat viewings, especially around Halloween, make *Kakurenbo* as timeless as it is beautiful.
✗ At 25 minutes, it leaves you wanting more, and it's definitely on the disturbing side for pre-teens, so be warned.

7.5
Score

If you see this girl in your dreams...wake up.

"A beautifully rendered, paced and especially lit CG short"

Ever play hide-and-seek as a kid? Remember that one house or abandoned place no one dared enter for fear of confronting a ghost or demon? Well, imagine if that place really did house such evil...and that was the good news. In *Kakurenbo*, it is whispered that the street where no one lives and lights flicker in the shadows swallows the children who play hide-and-seek there, never to be seen again. But even so, after his sister tempts

fate and doesn't return, Hikora, along with seven other curious children wearing the obligatory mask of the fox, decide to take the legend to task and breach the baroque quarter. What they discover there is worth the 80 cents a minute you'll pay to find out and then some. A beautifully rendered, paced and especially lit CG short, *Kakurenbo* is essential mythos for any horror aggregate. Dave Halverson



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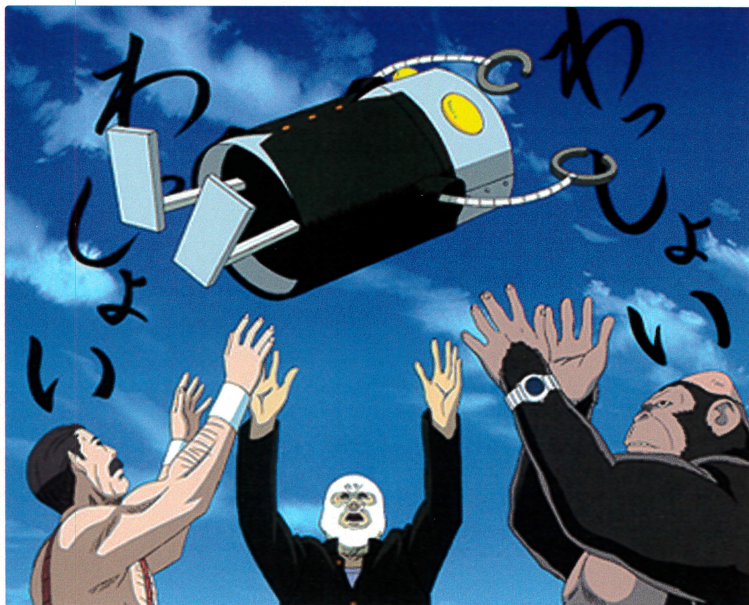
Cromartie High School

Volume 2 - "Hey Dude" & Volume 3 - "Sailin' Fools"

Released by: ADV Films Rating: TV-14 Running Time: 75 min. ea. Available: May (Vol. 2), July (Vol. 3)

You won't find a funnier title to watch this year in anime, guaranteed.
So the animation is cheap or repetitive, if not just talking heads, which could put some off...

9.5 8.5
Volume 2 Volume 3

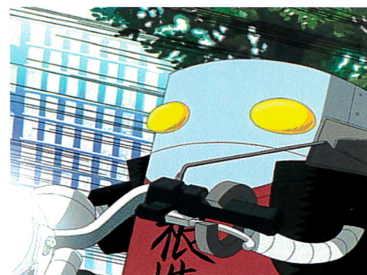
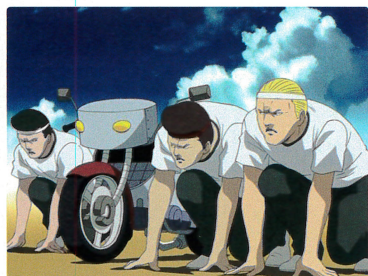


It's bad enough when you have to start out scared for your life, coming to one of the toughest high schools in the country. It's another thing entirely when you realize that everyone's not too bright and have to endure it...like rebuilding your friend into a motorbike after he crashes his own, or earning the title of the city's most feared student by simply answering a question about yogurt correctly...and that's just the tip of the iceberg. Bright kid Tamiyama just goes with the flow, because once you've seen a gorilla with a wristwatch in class, you've seen it all.

Volume 2 goes for a broader spectrum of insanity than Volume 3, wasting no time

by, well, accidentally wasting Mechazawa's little tin brother over and over again. Even dull moments like walking are rendered amusing by the characters walking forward and stepping backward in the shot, like a no-budget Hanna-Barbera cartoon. Volume 3 shows rapid-fire jokes work effectively, even on the sixth consecutive attempt of one. If you haven't given this a chance, you owe it to yourself to pick up at least one of these, which has only loose ties between the 15-minute episodes, leaving any point in this series an easy entry to get in on the deftly timed humor and insanity that is *Cromartie*. Jim Dewey

"...once you've seen a gorilla with a wristwatch in class, you've seen it all."



Born to be wild...and a can.



The Place Promised in Our Early Days

OVA

Released by: ADV Films Rating: TV-PG Running Time: 90 minutes Available: July

Attention to meticulous detail rivals that of any modern CG feature out today, and believable characters—appreciated.
Only the last five minutes effectively break the subdued tone, and the parallel universe subtext is downplayed.

8.5
Score

There was always this treehouse I wanted to build as a kid... I made a few attempts, got the lumber, the nails...but over time, the idea faded; I moved on and grew up. Best friends Hiroki and Takuya did one better—they built a plane that would fly them across the border to the Union's side in a post-civil war Japan and visit the tower that rose so high it disappeared from sight. They let shy violinist Sayuri in on their secret plan, but eventually they separated over time and distance, the Bella Cielia still sitting in the hangar, waiting to launch. Years later, as a declaration of war looms on the horizon, they become reunited through less than amicable ways and realize that they all together may hold the answer to putting a stop to it before it even starts...

Director Makoto Shinkai delves deeper into a story not much unlike his brilliant solo freshman effort, the short film *Voices of a Distant Star*, with significantly different results. Melodrama is played to the hilt as before, with both emotions and visual

dynamics weighing heavily in Shinkai's toolbox. Set pieces are taken directly from real-world sources, and it adds wonderfully to the realism. The story, however, feels bogged down with the sci-fi elements at times, and a deadly combination of soft voices, mood and music soothes to the point of lulling you into nodding off, which isn't fair for such talented material. But then again, life isn't always about explosions and intensity like in *Place's* finale, but about following through with choices we make, which these characters take to heart, building that symbolic treehouse that lies unfinished in all of our lives. Jim Dewey



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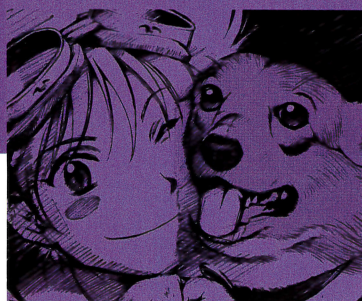
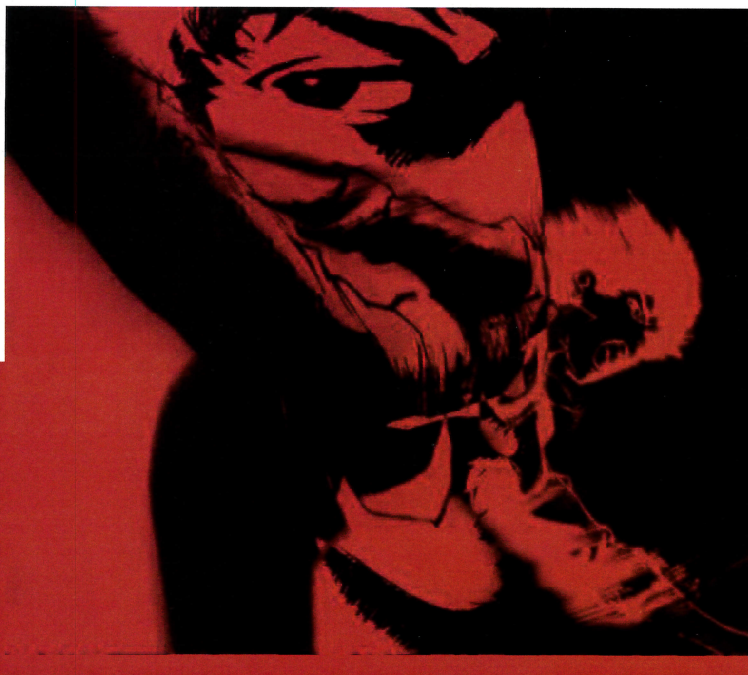
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Fistful of Woolongs

Roy Rogers they ain't

Talk about life imitating art: Tracking down the voice talents for the iconic anime series *Cowboy Bebop*—now being re-released with audio-enhanced Remix editions—proved to be quite the bounty. In interviewing Steve Blum (the frenetic Spike Spiegel) and Beau Billingslea (tough old dog Jet Black), we found out what it's like to be in their profession and also shed light on their other work, be it the recent voice of 7-11 in Blum's case or the lengthy on-camera work for Billingslea. Since their natural voices are shockingly close to their *Bebop* personas, you'd almost think they were still in character. Then again, maybe they still are... Jim Dewey

Interview

Steve Blum and Beau Billingslea,
voice actors, *Cowboy Bebop*



play: Let's start with what we all know and love... *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie*. You've both said that your respective characters have been your favorite to do, bar none. Why?

Beau Billingslea: I love Jet Black. I love the character and, as I've said in the past, in some respects Spike and Faye are like my real-life niece and nephew, trying to guide them along. He tries to keep his guard up, you know, like how those rugged rough guys are. [As Jet:] "Yeah, I don't need you around." But the subtext is, "God, I love you being here." It's obvious he loves the situation with the group on the *Bebop*, Jet's reactions to the kids' shenanigans. He's in my bones.

Steve Blum: The relationships between the characters were amazing, and we've actually forged real-life friendships as a result of working in the same studio. I think we all felt this show was something special. Very unusual for a medium where we do our parts individually! Voicing Spike was a benchmark in my career in a lot of ways. He fulfilled some fantasies of being the badass, but with that cool, smoking-gun way about him I always aspired to have. I guess there's something in each of my characters that reflect a piece of me in some way, but Spike allowed me to express the most depth and inner torment. Very complicated soul, very subtle and challenging to voice.

Which piece is a foul-mouthed inch-high duckling named Yakky Doodle in *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*?

Blum: A very sick one. [In a duck voice:] *I love Yakky!* [Elderly voice:] *...and I'm old!* Yakky's been a favorite of mine since I was a kid. He was one of the first voices I fooled around with *trying* to impersonate. I was thrilled to have landed a role like that, because he was one of the old classics. To have to opportunity to mess with that was just too enticing. Is that evil?

Not at all! Beau, you're a man of many hats... Lawyer, voice talent and prolific television actor. Where do you find time to sleep?

Billingslea: [chuckles] I've always had a life where I more or less had two jobs, and this rigorous work ethic instilled into me from my parents who had that as part of their daily lives. It allowed me to go out and do my own thing away from home, leaving me to say, "I can do that, I can be a lawyer or a medical doctor," and in having self-esteem that your parents give you.

You've been in practically every hour-long show from the early '80s, from the *A-Team* to *MacGyver* to *JAG* and *NYPD Blue*. Having been a real-life *JAG*, what did you think working on it?

Billingslea: *JAG* was good...they had their act together on that, Marine advisers, the

works, so I didn't have to worry about any inaccuracies. You don't want to say too much unless you have someone's ear, since you're only there for one or two episodes, not as a recurring character.

You work on TV comedies as well. Do you subscribe to the idea that "dying is easy, comedy is hard"?

Billingslea: Yeah, in a way, because comedy requires a certain delivery; it's all relative. With drama, it's your choice. You're not going for any specific response; you're going for the honesty of the character you're doing. Comedy says that it's in the timing and the delivery of the words. When I'm on a comedy audition and I'm reading the joke, sometimes I'm not finding it! Even worse is when the guy who went in before you has the room erupting in laughter, and you're sitting there thinking, "He's in there making it funny, and I couldn't find the joke. I knew I should have stayed in law..."

Steve, you also had a different path initially, working for a production company that focused on sci-fi movies doing lots of jobs...

Blum: [laughs] Every job.

...before you started as a voice talent. And only in the past few years you've made a full-time gig out of your voice.

How does that actually feel not doing the typical blue-collar job anymore?

Blum: I worked some pretty awful jobs through the years. Everything from servicing fire extinguishers in the gutters of downtown LA to taking my boss's dogs to be de-skunked and living with the smell in my truck for months! There's a part of me that misses the civilian life, but I don't miss sitting in an office every day. That was something I did for 15 years. For the most part, I have the best job in the whole world. I usually go to several studios in a day. I have a home recording booth, and sometimes I'll do auditions from there—which is nice because I can save myself countless hours of driving—and do auditions in my underwear at three o'clock in the morning. I'm grateful every single day.

Now, with anime productions, it's been common practice that voice actors are brought in rather quickly, given a script and shoved in front of a mic with only a small idea of the character they're portraying. How as actors does that affect you?

Blum: I think the fact that I have no formal acting training has been a blessing in some ways. Don't get me wrong, I admire trained actors. It's great to have those chops and often I do feel inadequate, at least on paper; but in VA when things can change in an instant, I think classical training can also be a hindrance for some people. For me,

down to the studio on a same-day audition, unlike voice acting. Compared to that, the voice work has to come from the nuances of the vocalizations, and it's a great challenge; we had to go through a number of approaches for Jet's voice. We even considered an accent originally, almost a southwestern dialect—but then Jet was 35, or so we were told...

Did you believe that's how old he was? He seemed to feel more like 45. Billingslea: I feel the same way; 35 is a bit young for his perspective on life, what he's been through, and the certain amount of patience that he developed for the younger characters. I think the voice matches well, honestly, given my older-sounding voice—even looking at the animation, I just get a sense he's older and wiser than that.

How does one go from being a non-actor to training as an actor in your case, Steve?

Blum: Years of doing it... For me going into it, I was so green, I just blasted away at the lines without even thinking about it. After the first couple of sessions, the technical part began to flow naturally. It just made sense to my warped mind. I started with some monster noises, an old man or two, then through the years I've watched other people's performances and became a pretty good mimic, I guess. The musical

actors...

Blum: (Warner Bros. talent) Bob Bergen and Jack Angel helped me to get in the big doors... I contacted them through a mutual fan, actually, and just to get replies from them in the form of an e-mail was exciting... I think I actually giggled like a schoolgirl. That was huge, to have the ears of these voice gods helping me out with my demo. Every day I get to meet and work with my heroes—people like Frank Welker and more recently Dee Baker—the voices of just about every creature in animation. I've been such a big fan since I was a little kid. I'd do the work for nothing, just for the privilege to watch them work. (Don't tell the producers though!)

Have there been any instances where the character changed vocally due to long-separated recording sessions? Or is there an opportunity for you to go back and review and match accordingly?

Blum: Generally they keep everything on file and give us a sampling, and hopefully if I'm in good condition I can match just about anything I've done before. I have had a few instances where it's tough, because I've aged and it ain't so easy to get out the high squeaky end any more, plus sometimes years go by and characters that I barely remember need to be revisited for some new media;



synchronization between voice and the on-screen character isn't there. The nature of video games is that you have to do all the alternative lines and shout-outs for battles and fight scenes, going down the list, which is a little bizarre because you're looking at a still shot of the character. With animation you have a better chance of synchronization with your subject because of what's going on on-screen at that time.

What about the Thug Leader in the Ratchet and Clank series?

Blum: Oh, yeah, he had that kinda "New Yoik ting goin' on." That was a nice job. They broke that up into smaller sessions, a hundred lines at a time, two hours a segment, which is *nothing* in the game world. A problem I find with a lot of games is that I'm called in on the 11th hour—just before the game is locked for release—so there's all this pressure on the recording staff to slam as much as they can in, and they'll want three takes on every single line I do.

Any word about the Bebop video game?

Blum: They have mentioned it. I haven't officially gone in to do anything yet, but they said it's coming soon. Keeping my fingers crossed.

Billingslea: Yes, I did a little demo for it for the powers that be, so make of that what you will...but (*Bebop*) is perfect for it, for what they do; and with the show being so loved, I'm anxious to do Jet in any capacity they'll let me.

What would you say has made Bebop maintain its longevity all this time?

Billingslea: The beautiful music, the great writing. It's timeless; the interweaving of the characters and their relationships...anyone watching can relate to it. The stories were so eclectic; one episode they're in the casino, then the Western theme, there's bound to be an episode you'd like. Sometimes it's sad, it brings you to tears, whatever, but when you have stories based in the human condition and experience that it becomes universal, and that's why it'll eventually become a classic.

Finally, I simply *must* have an answer for this... In your opinion, having viewed your characters beyond the movie, what do you think happened in the end?

Billingslea: I never came to a solid conclusion in my mind about what happened with Jet, but his heart was broken, romantically, and most likely the situation on the ship disintegrated with what happened to Spike. In the end, I think he drifted alone in his life after that.

Steve?

Blum: (Long pause) ...I'd like to think there's room for another story...but that's just my humble opinion. **play**

"...Spike allowed me to express the most depth and inner torment. Very complicated soul, very subtle and challenging to voice."

Steve Blum, "Spike Spiegel" on *Cowboy Bebop*



not having anything to draw from except life experience and simply going there and doing it has made it easy for me, as natural as breathing. Ninety-nine percent of it is cold reading. They hand me a script, three beeps (for the cue) and off you go. I try to match the character on screen as closely as possible... About half the time I get it right the first try. The greatest victory for me is hearing a voice I did, say, six months ago and not knowing it's me...fooling myself. That's when I know I've done my job well.

Beau, what about working both sides of the fence on acting?

Billingslea: Well, when it comes to working in live action and anime, it's the same process for auditions...fortunately, when you get the part on-camera, you have time to massage it into a full character, even after rushing

training helped—the rhythmic sense that's necessary for recording anime played into that. I went to a junior college through a musical program, sang in choirs, played in an R&B band for six years—guitar mostly, hand percussion, a little sax, background vocals...and really bad dancing.

And you've said in the past about what it's like to work with legendary voice

training helped—the rhythmic sense that's necessary for recording anime played into that. I went to a junior college through a musical program, sang in choirs, played in an R&B band for six years—guitar mostly, hand percussion, a little sax, background vocals...and really bad dancing.

Working in video games, does it become a different monster altogether?

Billingslea: A bit, sure, because the



listen to this



Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex OST 2

Released by: Bandai Entertainment

If you've never bought an anime soundtrack, make this your first one. "Can't be Cool" and "Rise" represent the epitome of the *Ghost in the Shell* genius, but every track on the CD brings with it a purposeful assault on the senses.



Mars Daybreak OST Log 1

Released by: Bandai Entertainment

The orchestral work and playful poesies are the highlight of Bandai's first *Daybreak* OST. Surrounded by the pop-inspired opening theme and the odd vocal track, this collection of overtures is more like what you'd expect from a big-budget Hollywood epic.

watch this

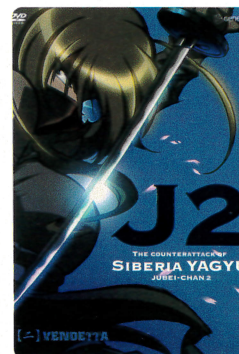


Ghost in the Shell: Innocence Music Video

Released by: Bandai Ent/Production I.G

Running Time: 42 minutes

Seven Music videos from Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell 2* presented in anamorphic widescreen and multi-channel surround, provide some of the most intoxicating and provocative visuals ever put to music: velvety-smooth jazz, new-age, techno-rock and trance guaranteed to alter your state.

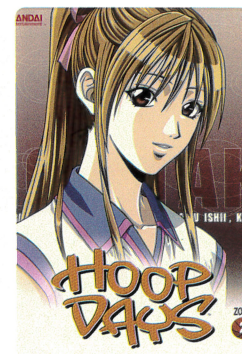


J2: The Counterattack of Siberia Yagyu

Released by: Geneon Ent. Rating: 13

Running Time: 75 minutes

If you're not into J2 already, wait no longer; Volume 2, *Vendetta*, is out now, and it's a stellar continuation of the first twist-laden chapter. A showdown 300 years in the making draws ever closer as Jiyu's vow to never accept The Lovely Eye Patch goes up in so much smoke.



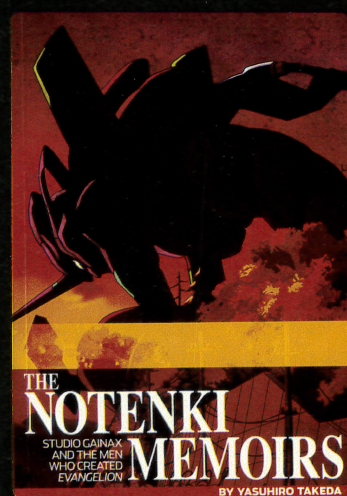
Hoop Days: Zone 2

Released by: Bandai Ent. Rating: 13

Running Time: 125 minutes

Sports anime! You want it, you need it! Forget the NBA and WNBA; these guys and girls exchange dialogue and think aloud on the court! The antics of Japanese high school basketball put the cheese back in high school sports drama to be sure. And you haven't laughed until you've seen the J-rap closing credits on this one.

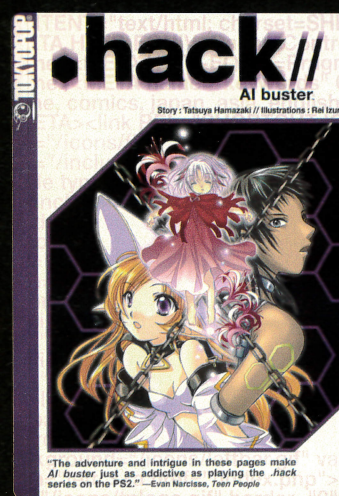
read this



The Notenki Memoirs

Released by: ADV Manga Author: Yoshihiro Takeda

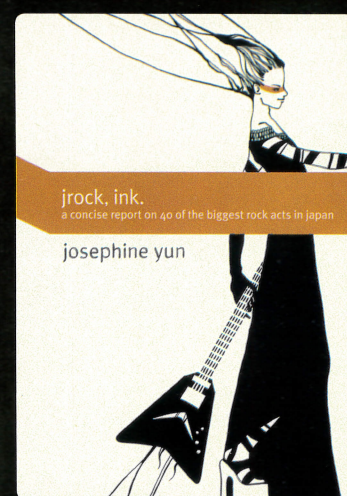
Almost unbelievably, *Memoirs of Madness* chronicles the real-life trials and tribulations behind world-famous animation studio Gainax's rocky rise to the top, including the production of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Beyond fascinating, this is the story no anime fan thought would ever break.



.hack//AI buster

Released by: Tokyopop Author: Tatsuya Hamazaki

This prequel to the series chronicles the journey of Albireo and Lycoris as they make their way through the most advanced online fantasy game ever created, headlong into stunning revelations leading up to the potential unraveling of cyber-space. A unique and intriguing novel with a decidedly pop-culture edge.



Jrock, Ink.

Released by: Stone Bridge Press Author: Josephine Yun

A fascinating look at the Japanese rock scene, introducing 40 of the hottest acts, past and present. *Jrock, Ink.* is your window into a world of rock music you'll wonder how you ever did without, packed with original art from Moscow-based illustrator Yana Moskaluk.



Author's mark and signature.

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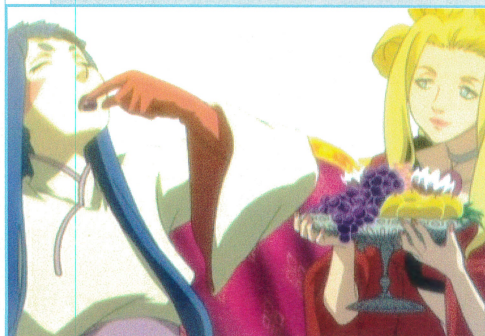
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animedatabase

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Samurai 7 funimation productions
02	Steamboy columbia tristar
03	Appleseed geneon entertainment
04	Burst Angel funimation productions
05	Fullmetal Alchemist funimation productions
06	Area 88 adv films
07	Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
08	Ghost in the Shell SAC bandai/manga entertainment
09	Elfen Lied adv films
10	GANTZ adv films



Play Magazine Top Ten

01	Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig bandai/manga ent.
02	Samurai Champloo vol. 4 geneon entertainment
03	Burst Angel vol. 3 funimation productions
04	Cowboy Bebop Remix bandai entertainment
05	Samurai 7 funimation productions
06	Cromartie High School vol. 3 adv films
07	Mars Daybreak bandai entertainment
08	Mythical Detective Loki adv films
09	Gilgamesh adv films
10	Street Fight Alpha Generations manga ent.



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Samurai Champloo
geneon entertainment

Volume 04 is the best yet. If you're not doing Champloo yet, now is the time!



Samurai 7
funimation

It was a forgone conclusion. FUNimation's Samurai 7 is destined to be a classic.

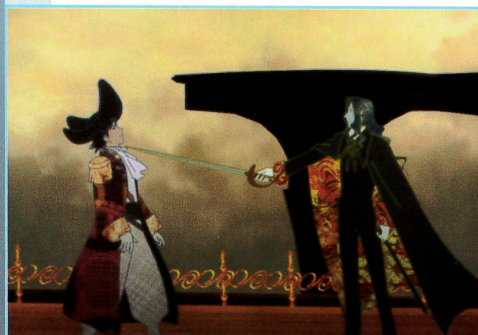
Dave Halverson

01	Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig bandai/manga ent.
02	Burst Angel funimation productions
03	Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
04	Gilgamesh adv films
05	MS Gundam SEED Movie II bandai entertainment



Jim Dewey

01	Gankutsuou geneon entertainment
02	Cowboy Bebop Remix bandai entertainment
03	Area 88 adv films
04	Samurai 7 funimation productions
05	Fullmetal Alchemist funimation productions



Nelson Lui

01	Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig bandai/manga ent.
02	Elfen Lied adv films
03	Jubei Chan 2 geneon entertainment
04	DearS geneon entertainment
05	Burst Angel funimation productions



Readers' Anime Top Five

01	Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
02	Gunslinger Girl funimation productions
03	Burst Angel funimation productions
04	Fullmetal Alchemist funimation productions
05	Ghost in the Shell: SAC manga entertainment

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	Ecole du Ciel tokyopop manga
02	Hurrah Sailor infinity studios
03	Blazin' Barrels tokyopop manga
04	Girls Bravo tokyopop manga
05	Cafe Occult infinity studios

Readers' Most Wanted

01	Gunslinger Girl vol. 2 funimation productions
02	Burst Angel vol. 2 funimation productions
03	Cowboy Bebop Remix bandai entertainment
04	Tenjho Tenge vol. 2 geneon entertainment
05	Elfen Lied vol. 2 adv films

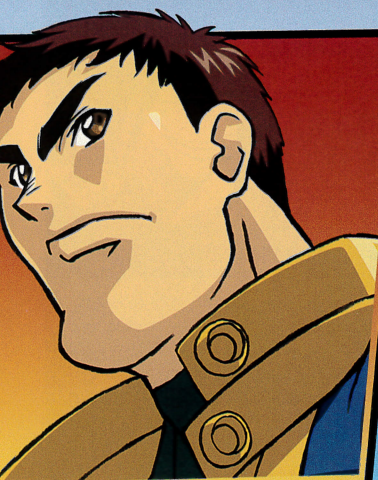
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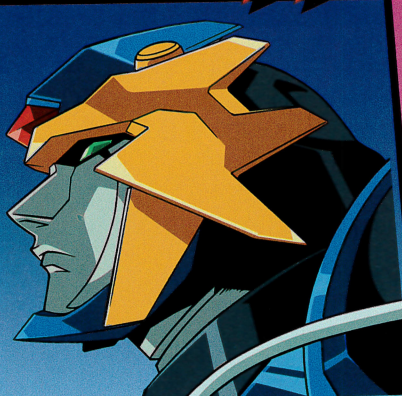
A GUIDE TO GODANNAR



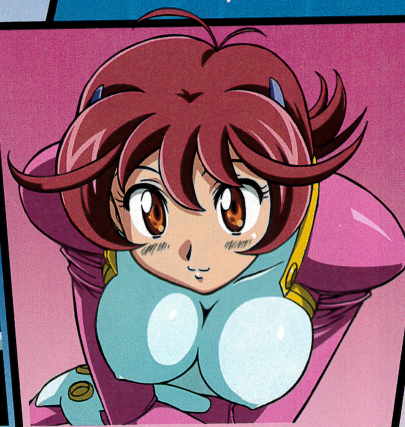
BECAUSE SO MUCH HAPPENS IN THE FIRST VOLUME OF THE EXCITING NEW SERIES **GODANNAR**, WE'VE PREPARED THIS QUICK GUIDE TO HELP YOU KEEP TRACK OF WHAT'S GOING ON, JUST IN CASE YOU BLINK.



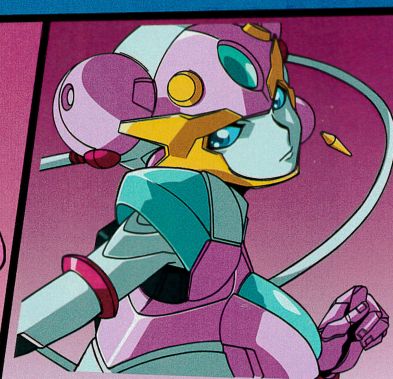
THIS IS GOH.



THIS IS GOH'S GIANT ROBOT.



THIS IS ANNA.



THIS IS ANNA'S GIANT ROBOT.



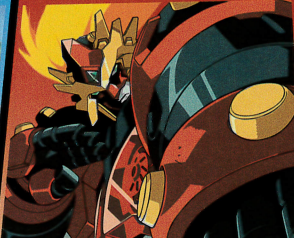
VE YEARS AGO, GOH AND HIS GIANT ROBOT SAVED ANNA'S LIFE WHEN....



...THE MIMETIC BEASTS FIRST ATTACKED THE EARTH. NOW THEY KEEP COMING BACK. THEY'RE ANNOYING.



MEANWHILE, GOH AND ANNA GOT MARRIED.



AND THEIR ROBOTS CAN MATE TOGETHER TO MAKE AN EVEN BIGGER ROBOT. (IS IT JUST US, OR IS THAT KINDA FREUDIAN?)



UNFORTUNATELY, GOH DOESN'T THINK HIS WIFE SHOULD BE HIS COMBAT PARTNER. THIS CAUSES PROBLEMS.



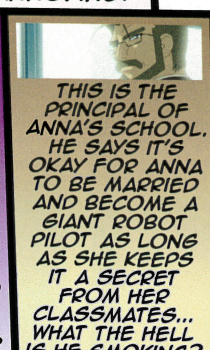
THIS IS SHIZURU, ANOTHER GIANT ROBOT PILOT WHO'S ALSO IN LOVE WITH GOH. THIS IS ALSO A PROBLEM.



THIS IS MIRA, GOH'S OLD COMBAT PARTNER AND GIRLFRIEND. EVERYONE THOUGHT SHE WAS DEAD BUT IT TURNS OUT THAT SHE'S NOT. THIS IS A REALLY BIG PROBLEM.



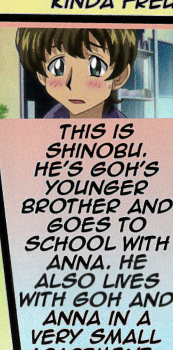
THIS IS KIRIKO. SHE'S ANNA'S MOM AND ALSO GOH'S BOSS. GUESS WHOSE SIDE SHE'S ON?



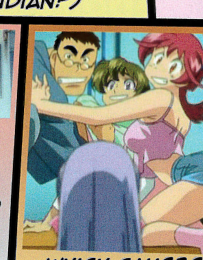
THIS IS THE PRINCIPAL OF ANNA'S SCHOOL. HE SAYS IT'S OKAY FOR ANNA TO BE MARRIED AND BECOME A GIANT ROBOT PILOT AS LONG AS SHE KEEPS IT A SECRET FROM HER CLASSMATES... WHAT THE HELL IS HE SMOKING?



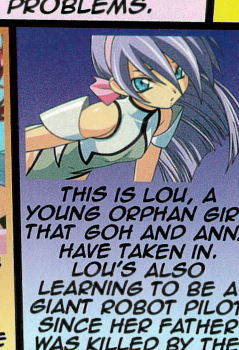
ANNA'S CLASSMATES. YOU CAN GUESS WHY THEY'RE IN THIS SERIES.



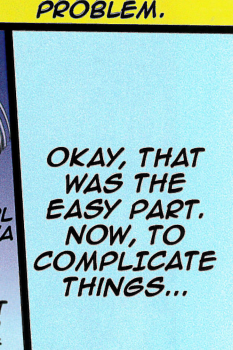
THIS IS SHINOBU. HE'S GOH'S YOUNGER BROTHER AND GOES TO SCHOOL WITH ANNA. HE ALSO LIVES WITH GOH AND ANNA IN A VERY SMALL APARTMENT...



...WHICH CAUSES EVEN MORE "PROBLEMS" IF YOU KNOW WHAT WE MEAN AND WE THINK YOU DO.



THIS IS LOU, A YOUNG ORPHAN GIRL THAT GOH AND ANNA HAVE TAKEN IN. LOU'S ALSO LEARNING TO BE A GIANT ROBOT PILOT SINCE HER FATHER WAS KILLED BY THE MIMETIC BEASTS.



OKAY, THAT WAS THE EASY PART. NOW, TO COMPLICATE THINGS...

LET'S ADD A PAIR OF NOT-QUITE TWIN RIDGE BUNNIES, THEIR DASHING COMMANDER, A REGNANT CAT, A HALF DOZEN SEXUALLY FRUSTRATED MECHANICS, A BAGGAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS,

THE CREW OF A SPACE STATION, NINE MORE GIANT ROBOT PILOTS IN A WIDE ASSORTMENT OF VARYING GENDERS, NATIONALITIES AND SEXUAL PREFERENCES,

A GENEROUS SPRINKLING OF FAN SERVICE AND, OF COURSE, A WHOLE SLEW OF ADDITIONAL GIANT ROBOTS AND MIMETIC BEASTS...

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Beck: Mongolian Chop Squad

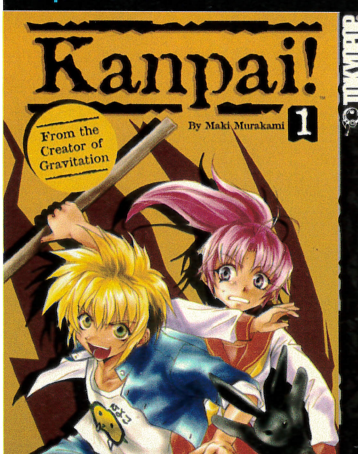


Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Comedy/Drama
Rating: 16 and older **Story and Art:** Harold Sakuishi

How much does it suck when you can't tell whether that girl you've been friends with for a few years now likes you or not? Even worse, some newcomer, a slightly older cool cat rock band front man is twice the man you are? Koyuki's got it bad, and even worse because his pervert best friend keeps getting him in trouble and a wild patchwork dog constantly bites him when he tries to make peace with it. But he's got a real good singing voice—say, that just may come in handy... The story is really shaping up for Vol. 2. **Jim Dewey**

Read it if: You're always rooting for the underdog, because you were that underdog.

Kanpai!

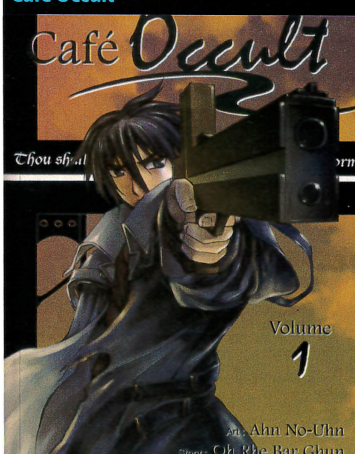


Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Horror/Comedy
Rating: 13 and up **Story and Art:** Maki Murakami

Ghosts, werewolves-turned-human, exorcists and monster guardians—and you thought Cromartie's class had a bunch of weirdos in it. Yamada's well on his way becoming a first-rate guardian until he catches a glimpse of beautiful schoolgirl Nao and falls in love... with the nape of her neck, not her. I know, freak fetish, but the whole story is bizarre in itself. Random violence, freak-out humor and a talking black rabbit for a sensei. Crazy enough for you yet? **Jim Dewey**

Read it if: You understand that werewolves are misunderstood creatures who like fetching baseballs.

Café Occult

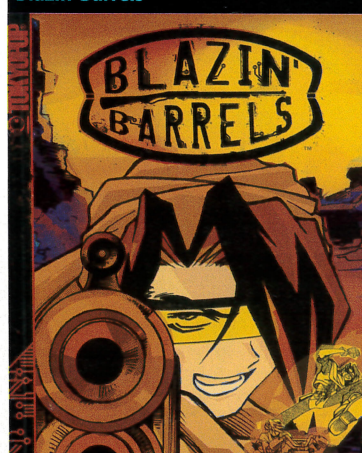


Publisher: Infinity Studios **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Horror
Rating: 13 and up **Story:** Oh Rhee Bar Ghun **Art:** Ahn No-Uhn

If only there was such a place as Café Occult... somewhere to instantly immigrate at the moment of death for a nice cup of coffee. Sounds peaceful, unless, of course, you found yourself pursued on the other side. Such is the case for the cute Suh Rin, leveled by a speeding truck in the pouring rain in the prime of her young life. But why did she happen upon the Café just before her untimely demise? And, moreover, why does the devil want her so badly that he sends out his shape-shifting fiends to snatch her? **Dave Halverson**

Read it if: You like post-mortem hotness and the never-ending battle between good and evil... with a playful spirit.

Blazin' Barrels

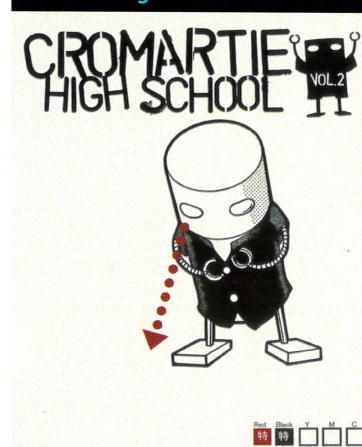


Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action/Adventure
Rating: 10 and older **Story and Art:** Mine-Seo Park

I love a good neo-Western, especially when it's delivered in such a way that it's all I can do to fight back urges for a game and anime spin-off. Mine-Seo Park delivers a Korean manga that perfectly plugs into the Western video game and anime mindset about an opportunistic wannabe with mad skills named Sting, a ruthless bounty hunter named Black, and Gold Romany, the all-female gang of outlaws they're itching to catch... not to mention the cliffhanger du jour, the lovely Leanne McDuff. **Dave Halverson**

Read it if: You like guns, girls, dirt whomin' vehicles, kung fu and bad intentions.

Cromartie High School



Publisher: ADV Manga **Volume:** 2 **Genre:** Comedy
Rating: 13 and older **Story and Art:** Ejiji Nonaka

If you haven't read the anime review this issue for *Cromartie*, go do that now, I'll wait... Back? Good. Now go pick this up already. You know you love to laugh, and it's a heck of a lot easier to get into than waiting for the DVD to load. Mechazawa's sold as an appliance, boxers slugging their corner men, alien meteorites containing goodwill ambassadors with short schedules? What's not to love? You don't even need Vol. 1, but it helps. Achingly funny for a school of non-violent, over-analytical badasses. **Jim Dewey**

Read it if: Freddie Mercury's on a black stallion that's biting students' heads! You know you're intrigued...

Fighting!! Guidance

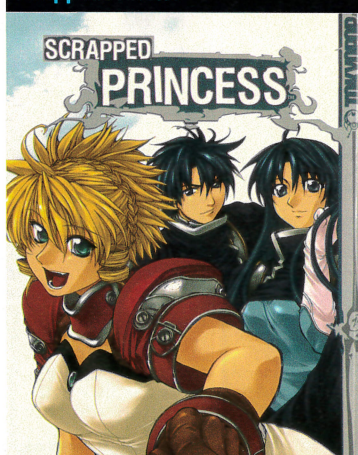


Publisher: Infinity Studios **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Comedy/Action
Rating: 13 and up **Story:** Keuk-Jim Jeon **Art:** Hye-Jim Eom

Fight! Fight! Fight! Actually, that's just what Ghi-Han's trying to quit doing... He can lay guys out twice his size with one punch, but he's tired of that. He just wants to go to class and learn something for a change. Taking the high road isn't always the easiest path though, and he finds himself cracking jokes that usually end up landing him and his new friend Hyun-Ha in more fisticuffs. Likeable, tough and goofy, Ghi-Han echoes of Vash the Stampede... just without the guns and Western theme. **Jim Dewey**

Read it if: You don't need fan service in your comedy/brawler mangas like Ikki Tosen.

Scrapped Princess



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action
Rating: 13 and up **Story:** Ichiro Sakaki **Art:** Go Yabuki

It's always tough stacking up the comparisons between a manga and its anime adaptation... Pacifica is still being hunted all the same for fear of a prophecy calling her the harbinger of millions of deaths... only in this telling, things aren't so bright and cheerful. Lots more sword-swingin' action and blood-drawn violence on this side of the fence, and brother Shannon really brings the hurt this time. Characters not seen early on in the anime appear as well, really bringing a new angle to it. **Jim Dewey**

Read it if: Twelve-against-one odds are always a good time.

Girls Bravo



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Comedy/Drama
Rating: 13 and up **Story and Art:** Mario Kaneda

Behind almost every great anime, you'll find the manga that inspired it—a trend that we enjoy in reverse much of the time here in the states, but enjoy nevertheless. In *Girls Bravo*'s case, having seen the anime, I was more anxious than usual to see how much more they'd push the promiscuity envelope. Surprisingly, the manga is the tamer of the two. All is well, however, as the story—about a girl-phobic boy who finds himself awash in a sea of hotties—comes across even better in print. **Dave Halverson**

Read it if: You're not completely fed up with prude Japanese schoolboys getting raped by beautiful women.

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- 02 Berserk Vol. 8 Media Blasters
- 03 Nightmare Before Christmas Manga GN Disney Press
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- 05 Rurouni kenshin Vol. 16 Viz Media

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Range Murata's Tint Robot

In an age of character illustration where grittiness and exaggerated physicality reign, illustration master Range Murata's work rails against that ideal. From his designs on the airborne saga of *Last Exile* or the underwater OVA *Blue Submarine 6* to his work with games like *Spy Fiction*, man and machine come off as believable in worlds of pure fiction. Murata is also a lover of other artists' work and is now overseeing his lavishly illustrated manga compendium, *Robot: Super Color Comic*, whose stories vary from the silly and cute to the graphic and adult-natured. Murata honored me by sitting down to talk about the book, now being released and translated stateside by Digital Manga Publishing. *Jim Dewey*

Interview
Range Murata, anime illustrator

play: Tell me a little about how you came up with the idea for *Robot*. Why did you feel you wanted to put this together?

Range Murata: I have a lot of creative friends in the industry, but a lot of their work isn't seen in magazines. So, I thought to put together my own book to catalog, to showcase their talents—both manga and illustration—and to have it fully colored. It was that concept that gave birth to it all.

Were there any problems with the project?

Not really, because Wani Magazine in Japan (whom I do a lot of work with, not to mention I'm friends with the president of it), welcomed it with open arms. I wanted this to be accessible to more fans as opposed to, say, the book I did with illustration and fashion design in 1999.

So you wanted it to cross genres in manga as well for a wider audience. [Laughs] Right on.

The second volume was released earlier this year in Japan. Do you find yourself wanting to make a third volume? Maybe even more?

The third installment is just now out in Japan, the fourth some time in September. I'm aiming for a new volume every two months.

What about new artists? Will you be introducing even more talent?

It's a combination of my colleagues, new talent I admire, and ones that the publisher recommends, but I essentially have the final word on who's going to make it in.

What of your own art? Will you be contributing every issue as well?

I have the artists submit a story outline before they start, but because of this, it's hard to find time to work on my own illustrations. I'm going to try my hardest to have at least two to three illustrations per volume and the cover; forgive me if I don't have more!

Having gotten involved with fashion design, what do you find more pleasure in—the outfit, or the character in them? Or a little of both?

I love design overall, but there's no difference in it for me, whether it's young or old character illustrations. When it comes to objects, it's an even bigger rush when I can see them rendered three-dimensionally, say with video games like *Spy Fiction*.

What do you think of the well-endowed character design used heavily today in manga and anime, given that you favor the petite design?

In drawing the figures, I favor sleek lines just like my other non-character work, and a character who is larger in the chest just entirely disrupts the flow of the lines. I have nothing against them in the real world, however [smiles].

What is your most beloved time and location in history when it comes to design?

Oh, a good question! I love the time around 1910-1920—the industrial revolution, when man and machine began working cohesively together. Speed was incorporated into daily life, and aerodynamics began to come into play even more with aircraft, which I loved to put into my work with *Last Exile*. I really

"I wanted to draw things that could believably exist in reality but don't."

Range Murata, anime illustrator



wanted to incorporate the nuts and bolts, the real grittiness of the era, but still give the design some distinct characteristics. I wanted to draw things that could believably exist in reality but don't.

If you didn't find yourself in the line of work you are today, what do you think you might be doing instead?

I would have [been] involved with the auto industry designing cars, which originally I had gone to school for.

Fashion, character design, editorial and publishing... What's your next goal?

This may not be the most colorful answer, but I don't set goals for myself. I'm a

terrible slacker. If I ever set some, I'd never accomplish them. I basically go with the flow, and just let things come as they may.

Finally, when I set up to take a picture of Murata-san in front of a sleek, new foreign sports car for the article, given his education and style, he asked instead if he could stand in front of the blue, beat up domestic van near it. I asked him why he favored it over the other, to which he simply replied, "It's much cooler." Truer words never were spoken about the mind of Range Murata.

Hurrah! Sailor

HURRAH!SAILOR

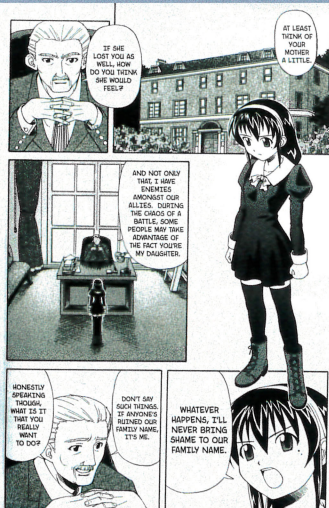
Volume 1



Pub: Infinity Studios **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Drama/Comedy **Rating:** 13+
Story: Rintaro Koike **Character Design:** Kouichi Kiga **Art:** Katsuo Nakane

I love a good marooned castaway story. The isolation, the adaptation to the new environment, the skinning of cute and fuzzy animals to survive... Wait, scratch that last one. Unfortunately, the crew of the starship Narai got caught in a skirmish between their fleet and the enemy, and are sent crashing into a neutral planet below. Only a handful survive, and they begin their hunt through boxes to find a master chip to start repairs to get off the surface. Between an enigmatic little crew member with superhuman abilities, a foe who

doesn't want to help (and even deceives) and an ensign forced to lead everyone, there's bound to be a few flared tempers. Fortunately, the local village gives them hope through advice and friendship. Hurrah! has a great art style that lends very well to an anime production, and stories of how the characters came to be on board this ship only further draw the reader into what appear to be formulaic players in this story at first glance, but deepen greatly as the pages go on. **Jim Dewey**



Read it if: Gilligan's Island just wasn't good enough for you—it needed starships!

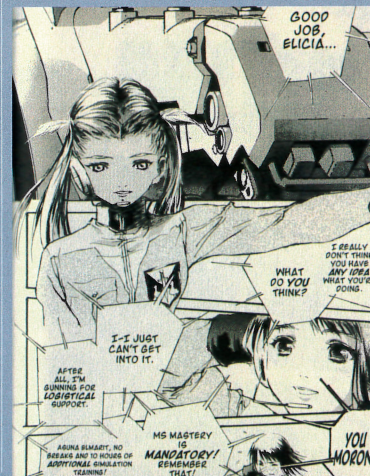
Mobile Suit Gundam Ecole du Ciel



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Sci-Fi/Drama
Rating: 13 and up **Story and Art:** Haruhiko Mikimoto

I've watched countless Gundam anime and played a pile of games, but I've only ever really been "into" one series in the vast Gundam universe—MS 08th Team—until now. This new vision of life in and around Mobile Suits circa 0085, written by Haruhiko Mikimoto, creator of the Macross universe takes a similar yet even more alluring approach through the eyes of a young woman pushed into the MS training academy Ecole du Ciel. The story paints Asuna as the duck born of a swan, and we all know how that ended up, although I'm not so sure if this

particular story is heading in that exact direction. The brunt of the story is as much about the lives around her as it is her own peculiar outlook on life, while drawing subtle parallels to similar fodder, but in more articulate fashion through exquisite art and Asuna's peculiar inner voice. For a girl going through so much both emotionally and physically, the fact that she seems more concerned about her cup size than woman-handling tons of lethal steel is odd to say the least, and a little diversity is just what the doctor ordered when it comes to anything you need a glossary to understand. **Dave Halverson**



Read it if: You've been waiting for the perfect excuse to get into Gundam.

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DOOM: THE MOVIE

No-holds-barred gloom and doom

words Brady Fiechter

Bang!
Karl Urban lays the smack down
as John 'Reaper' Grimm.

Wandering through the labyrinthine Doom movie set is like taking a stroll through a death museum in hell. Mutilated bodies lie stuck in doorways, hanging over ledges and crumpled in piles in the corners amongst blood-stained walls. The shadowy, sterile lab setting in this subterranean Mars research facility comes crushing in on you, even though it's all just carefully crafted make believe. "During the day, I'm fine. In bed, I'm a mess," laughs Rosamund Pike, who plays Doctor Samantha Grimm in this big-screen adaptation of the most successful first-person shooter franchise in video games. "It's all registering somewhere."

When you see the actors going through their stunts, firing off massive guns ripped directly from the game, you can imagine the grueling toll taking the intense first-person shooter to the big screen can be. True to the ubiquitous carnage around

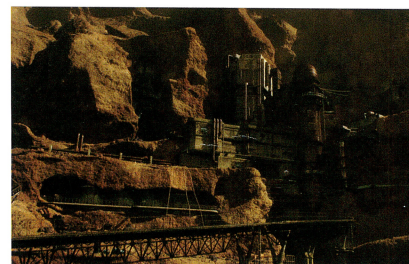
them, some of the actors looked like they've indeed gone through hell. "It's one of the most challenging, exhausting, most physical films I've ever done," says Karl Urban, who plays military clean-up man John 'Reaper' Grimm. "But it really is a lot of fun...firing these cool weapons, it's so wrong, but it's so right."

While most game-to-movie adaptations have been suspect at best for a number of reasons, outside of the convincing sets and attention to appropriate details, Doom has a lot of talent behind it who are actually gamers and into the series. "I'm a big fan of the game, and a lot of my friends are too. I thought, I don't want to be involved with something if they're not going to do it justice, they're not going to do it right," says Urban. And as a fan, it must be cool to become the game, to step into its world in a whole new dimension. "It's so surreal, because I remember, when I'd play the game, it would just suck you

in, it was nightmarish. When you're playing the game, it's as if nothing else exists. And then it's so surreal, you step onto this set, everything is three-dimensional. I feel like the luckiest guy on earth. I've got the three-dimensional game going on and I'm getting paid for it. It's awesome."

While none of the CG-generated monsters had been fully revealed, the day we were on set granted a look at the ominously towering Hell Knight, whose intricate animatronics combined with an actor in the giant suit held a creepy presence even off-camera. Playing the part of one of Doom's most badass killers was a grueling workout in itself. "I'm getting up two times in the middle of the night to load carbs and load protein," says Brian Steele. "It's amazing. I do creature work for a living, and I'm just overwhelmed with excitement and enthusiasm for the next level we've taken the Hell Knight to."

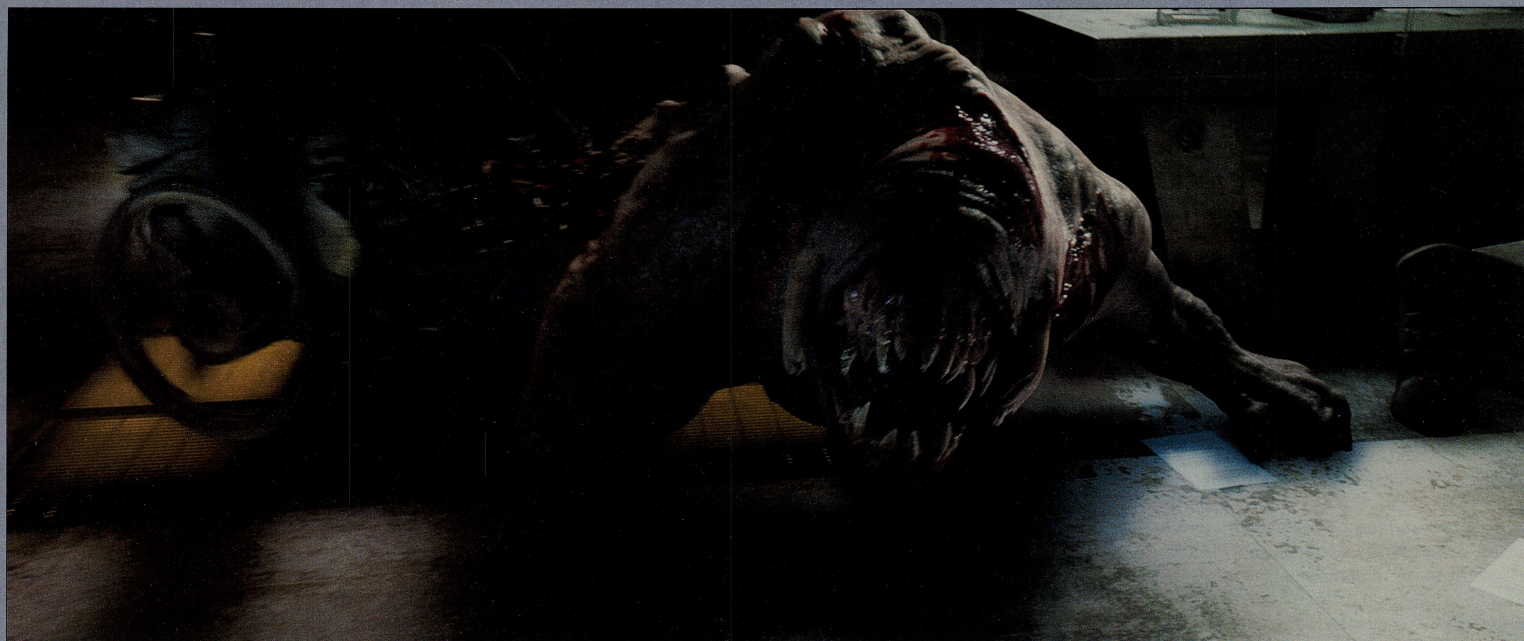
Also appearing in Doom is Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, who plays the part of Sarge, based off Master Sergeant Thomas Kelley from Doom 3. He's vehemently dedicated to his role in the Marine Corps, bent on quarantining the area at whatever



The Rock loves his big guns...



"True to the ubiquitous carnage around them, some of the actors looked like they've indeed gone through hell."



While *Doom* will contain a good amount of animatronic monster, CG plays its part.

cost. "As soon as we get off the helicopter, it's balls to the wall, all hell breaks loose," says Johnson. "...It's almost like reliving a childhood dream of being able to carry around and use four guns at one time. I've got a BFG, I've got a rifle, I've got a handgun, and I've also got this chain gun; it's basically one of those guns that's mounted on top of a Humvee that our soldiers use. So if you can imagine, take that gun and put a strap to it [laughs]. Awesome." And how was it playing this Sarge guy? "I get to play my first what I call BMFOP, the baddest mother f---er on the planet. I'm excited about that. I had my first execution last week."

It should be noted that *Doom* is rated R, or "R-plus," as The Rock enthusiastically puts it. From what the sets portray, the actors speak of, and the crew gleefully shows off with all their ghastly designs, this is not a watered-down commercial look into a game whose title speaks for itself. "When I talked with [director] Andrzej [Bartkowiak] on the phone before I came over, he asked what was important, and I said, well, it's important to me to deliver on the sci-fi front, on the video game front, and on the horror front," The Rock says. "All genres are very, very loyal, so it's important. And I said, with an R rating, we have the ability to really scare people, and I think we should scare the shit out of people. And he goes, 'Well, we're not going to do that.' [So there's] a long pause. And I say, 'What do you mean?' And he goes, 'We're gonna f---ing terrify them.'"



Crash

Starring: Don Cheadle, Sandra Bullock, Matt Dillon
Director: Paul Haggis
Released By: Lions Gate Films
Rated: R

Racism, fear and emotional unrest collide in this powerful film by first-time director Paul Haggis, who also wrote the raw and equally direct *Million Dollar Baby* from last year. Set in tension-filled Los Angeles, *Crash* follows the interlocking lives of characters from several races, who eventually meet up in climactic scenes of staggering intensity. Even when the film stumbles, brushing up against stereotypes and forced coincidence, the breathless intensity of the lives onscreen maintains a feverish resonance. Its humor is smartly placed, keeping the story from becoming unnecessarily dour and wooden; the characters are sharply real, hitting uncomfortably close to home. Unlike most films preaching against the wicked destruction of racism, *Crash* is less obvious, a reflection on the bigotry in us all that can't be escaped, as much as we'd like to ignore it. This one sticks with you.

Brady Flechter
Movie: A- **Extras:** NA



The Simpsons: The Complete Sixth Season

Starring: Dan Castellaneta, Hank Azaria, Julie Kavner, Nancy Cartwright, Yeardley Smith (voices)
Director: Various
Released By: 20th Century Fox Home Video
Rated: NR



If you don't buy it for the generation-defining satire, do so for the Homer-head case and the fact that the longest-

running weekly series in TV history still has something to say about alien conspiracies, repressed memories, Australians and home distribution of toxic pharmaceuticals. Watching Groening stretch his characters' iconic personalities to wax profound after all these years is beyond humbling, and the extensive commentaries from Groening on down (writers, directors, actors...) make the collection that much sweeter. I can think of few better ways to spend 575 minutes glued to the TV. Dave Halverson

Movie: B+ **Extras:** B-

Ong-Bak: The Thai Warrior

Starring: Tony Jaa, Petchtai Wongkamlao
Director: Prachya Pinkaew
Released By: Magnolia Pictures
Rated: R

Venturing to Bangkok to recover the sacred Buddha head stolen from his humble village, Ting (Tony Jaa) is forced to break his promise that he'll never resort to violence, battling his way through crony after crony controlled by the mob boss responsible for the whole mess. That's pretty much *Ong-Bak: The Thai Warrior*, carrying with it the most simplest of stories that serves little purpose other than to breezily cut up sequence after sequence of absolutely thrilling action sequences. Tony Jaa is a spectacle to watch, running through one awe-inspiring stunt after another; watching this nimble acrobat perform is such a treat, the director even decided to do a double-take from different angles as Jaa slips through plate glass windows, zig-zags across walls and flips over traffic. Nicely photographed and charmingly staged, *Ong-Bak*'s a fun little film that's hard not to like. Brady Flechter

Movie: B **Extras:** NA



Robots

Starring: Ewan McGregor, Halle Berry, Greg Kinnear, Mel Brooks
Director: Chris Wedge, Carlos Saldanha
Released By: 20th Century Fox Home Video
Rated: PG

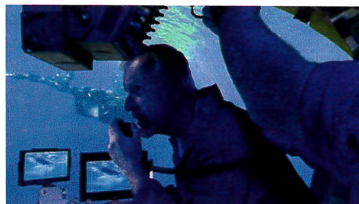
Now that the newness of CGI has long faded, the lines are becoming increasingly defined, separating mere eye candy from mind candy; the difference between a *Shrek* or *Incredibles* and an *Ice Age* or *Valiant* is as obvious as the high prices of the popcorn you're wolfing down. We come expecting pristine visuals, so you better have something to say, and *Robots* does. Not only does *Robots* house among the (if not *the*) most gorgeous CGI I've seen to date (and I live in the details), the underlying sermon on society's depravity is the kind of imbedded innuendo that keeps adults as affixed as the kids who just wanna see Fender chase down his own head. (Williams, by the way, is magical.) The simple story about the son of an actual dishwasher's (McGregor's Copperbottom) trek to the big city, chasing his dream of becoming an inventor, is so peppered

Aliens of the Deep

Starring: OMO
Director: James Cameron
Released By: Buena Vista Pictures
Rated: G

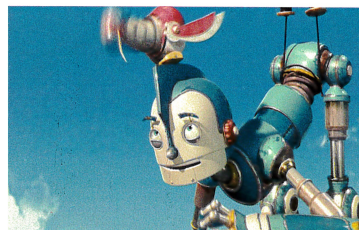
Like most docs filmed for the towering Imax experience, *Aliens of the Deep* loses its visual kick on DVD, but that's not to say this fascinating look at the creatures of the deep sea is without its wide-eyed moments. Directed by an infectiously enthusiastic James Cameron, who appears on camera and deserves credit for driving such a project, *Aliens of the Deep* is shot with a panache not normally found in the genre, and while there are better, more in-depth looks at oceanic life, the film puts you face to face with some captivating creatures. A little dabbling in the science behind everything joins some CG embellishments to give the film a final shine. Brady Flechter

Movie: B **Extras:** NA



with invention and perfect performances on all sides of the equation it demands an immediate second viewing, and the extras are, as expected, fascinating. Blue Sky is in this race to win, and they just pulled neck-and-neck with the leader. Dave Halverson

Movie: A- **Extras:** B+



Sahara

Starring: Matthew McConaughey, Steve Zahn, Penelope Cruz
Director: Breck Eisner
Released By: Paramount
Rated: PG-13



The back of the *Sahara* DVD case proclaims the protagonists are "pitting their skills against ruthless enemies bent on world destruction." When your distributor doesn't even care what the movie is about, you know you're in serious trouble. The "ruthless enemies" in *Sahara* are a greedy industrialist sitting on top of the world's biggest toxic waste dump (what's the Merovingian doing in the middle of the desert anyway?) who is *inadvertently* polluting the rivers and spreading the plague that Penelope's good doctor is chasing and a crooked North African president who acts more like a drug cartel lord but can't hit the broad side of a barn with an Apache helicopter and a legion of tanks...and these are the plausible parts of *Sahara*. Neither is bent on world destruction, nor is any intent ever proclaimed. The actual plot borders on, no, scratch that—is—is—asinine. You always see in DVD extras how the actors endure dangerous stunts and the production being delayed by Mother Nature's wrath, both of which were significant in filming *Sahara*... to make a cheesy *Bond* rip-off? All that so McConaughey's Dirk Pitt could toss a random charge in the middle of the Sahara and discover the civil war gunship (that drifted from Virginia to Africa, no less) he's been searching for his entire adult life in a few feet of sand? And then the cannon still works?! Taken as pure farce, *Sahara* is still a stretch, and it's a shame, because the actors down the line deliver the adventure goods, especially McConaughey, who seems born to the role. A fun movie over all, but that's it. Narrow escapes and near misses can only take you so far.

Dave Halverson

Movie: C+ **Extras:** B-



Rock stars in excess



Talking *Mods* with IBC Digital founder and president Benjamin Porcari and MTV2 director of Video Mods Frank Drucker

Interview

Benjamin Porcari, IBC Digital founder and president
Frank Drucker, director of Video Mods for MTV2

play: How does a mod come to pass? Does MTV2 select the games and contact the publisher, or do the publishers pitch MTV2?

Frank Drucker: It's a little of both, but mostly our committee making a wish list of games and having Tamayu Takayama, our rights and clearance person, approach the publishers. We try to get a variety of genres and what games are being newly released. Ben Porcari: In most cases, the MTV2 team, Frank Drucker and myself toss out ideas and brainstorm together to make the song/game pairings. Developers and labels are then approached to gauge interest. In some cases, developers and labels might approach MTV2 and express interest in having a particular game or artist be a part of the show. If there is a match with the MTV2 audience, then these are the pairings that happen the easiest.

Once IBC receives the Maya files, do they work with the developer/publisher or pretty much have free reign?

Porcari: IBC Digital is pretty much working independently on the mod as far as production, but creative is always shared with developers and labels during the process so we are all on the same page. Everyone involved wants to make the best mod possible, so teamwork and communication are very important.

Drucker: We give the publishers a written description of a creative concept. We show them work-in-progress along the way and we react and adjust to anything they seriously object to.

Do you find that these days most bands are playing video games?

Drucker: We interviewed many bands, and it seems like a lot of them are playing games when on tour to pass the time.

Porcari: Yes, the band interviews we've done certainly support that. I think that trend carries out into the general population as well. Older and older people consider themselves gamers. I think that more sophisticated games and exciting content have pushed games more out into the mainstream of entertainment.

I know Linkin Park is heavy into games

and anime. Why haven't they stepped up yet? Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex? Perhaps Gungrave?

Porcari: We are working on it... I am sure everyone involved would love to see a Linkin Park mod.

Drucker: I wouldn't rule that out as a possibility. I would love to set up something with MTV2's website where suggestions can be sent in for song and game matches.

Most of the models used for Mods seem of in-game quality. Is this to retain the look of the game or simply a matter of time and budget constraints?

Porcari: A little of both. Cinematic models are very complex and not easily suited to mo-cap without a great deal of weight mapping and skeletal rigging. If we get the models in a set-up condition then we have an easier time using them in a mod. Sometimes the assets are beautiful, but between setup and file conversion from a different platform, there just isn't the time to use the high-resolution versions and make our airdate.

Drucker: You'll see more and more cinematic-quality video mods this season. The mod we did for Franz Ferdinand and Star Wars required 30,000 CPU rendering hours.

For the most part, the songs seem pretty well suited to the material. But let's talk about Death, Jr. My Chemical Romance's I'm Not Okay seems an odd song choice, to say the least. Shouldn't the spawn of Death be cranking out the metal? It's almost as unthinkable as Good Charlotte doing Darkwatch sans Jericho or Cassidy. Who is in control of putting song to game?

Drucker: That decision lies mostly in the hands of the following individuals—me (Frank Drucker), Ben Porcari and Alex Colletti (executive producer on the show)—the three creative drivers of this season of *Video Mods*.

Porcari: Video mods are designed to have a broad appeal and showcase a lot of great music and cutting-edge games. We work with a variety of music, from rock to hip-hop and everything in between. I don't know if I would quite agree on call-



"We interviewed many bands, and it seems like a lot of them are playing games..."

Frank Drucker, director of Video Mods

ing Death, Jr. and My Chemical Romance an odd match. The band has an amazing energy and a bit of a sarcastic edge, a perfect match with Death, Jr.'s blend of attitude and Gothic environments. I think that's the fun part of video mods, unexpected song/game pairings and different creative interpretations.

Well, I suppose if Slipknot was busy... Do you shy away from metal because of a certain demographic you're looking to attract?

Porcari: Not at all. We have developed a few hard rock or metal concepts and some are still in the pipeline. Sometimes logistics and legal issues can spoil a match made in heaven. Because of this, producing *Video Mods* is a very dynamic experience. A lot of juggling and irons in the fire!

Do you see Mods continuing into the next generation consoles? If so, aren't we talking considerably more pricey productions?

Porcari: I definitely see *Mods* continuing with next-generation mods. Some concepts are already in the works; stay tuned! Drucker: The mods will continue to get more sophisticated. We use the super-computer at the University of Buffalo for a lot of our rendering, so we're ready to handle the next generation. Two-thousand computers are standing by ready to render *Video Mods* for the future.

Was it difficult getting George Lucas to sign off on Franz Ferdinand's Take Me Out? Gotta love Yoda on drums.

Drucker: It was actually a lot easier to get approval on this than some other game publishers! He seemed to be intrigued by the *Video Mods* concept.

Porcari: Yup, it went smoothly, actually. It was *amazing* to be a part of it. To have characters everyone has known and loved for decades and put them in a music video rocking out to Franz Ferdinand was a lot of fun. The mod was really a testament to what extent the *Star Wars* characters have become part of the general consciousness and pop culture in general. I think that George Lucas and his team recognized that fans would really enjoy a *Star Wars* video mod, and something as cool as Yoda on the drums was a not-to-be-missed opportunity.

Why is the mod for Evanescence's Bring Me To Life so technologically superior to the rest? What's the story behind that?

Porcari: I believe the mod was created with some technical support from Nvidia, a leading graphics-card and display-technology company.

So they had a more active role in their production... Might MTV2 pursue other video game-oriented series or content?

Porcari: I think it's ultimately possible; if there is an audience, there will be content created to meet that demand. Gamers vote for more gaming-oriented programming by what they watch, so check your local listings and tune in to *Video Mods*! Drucker: There is definitely stuff in development, but it's top secret, and if we told you, we'd have to kill you.

What if I told you that I'm really a reanimated corpse? Can we get a little taste of what's in store? Gaming's big Q4 blitzkrieg is approaching fast...

Drucker: You'll be seeing more and more storyline-based mods and less performance-oriented mods. Also, we want to show more glimpses into the lives of the game characters when they are not in gameplay or a video mod. What do these characters do for fun? Do they do laundry? Do they have love lives? So definitely stay tuned! **play**

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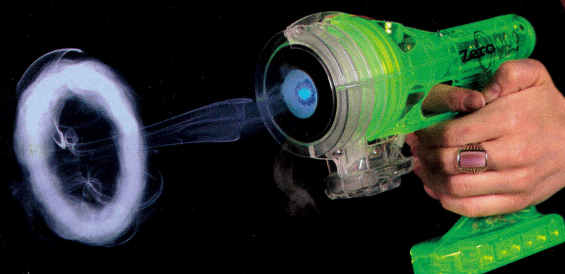
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BACK OF THE BOOK

Blah, blah, blah



10 05 BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Defining gameplay...

A few years ago, I had a conversation with Warren Spector, respected industry veteran responsible for such games as *Deus Ex* and *Thief*. We were talking about the conventional wisdom behind gameplay, and the assembly line approach to which most developers are confined. Toying with some progressive ideas, he had one in particular I found quite intriguing: imagine a game where you found only one gun, which had one bullet. The moment you chose to fire that shot would be the most important decision you've ever had to make with the use of force in a game.

The conversation ended with the concession that now was not the time to even explore such a set up. I have no idea what he might have had in mind to fill in an engaging world around the core concept—the brief discussion ended just when it started to get really interesting—but I could come up with my own little theories as to why now indeed is not the time. In our current mindset, would enough gamers even respond to what might amount to an unusually passive gaming environment? Do graphics ultimately matter enough that if gamemakers decide to explore certain ideas beyond constant confrontation to keep us involved in their worlds, those worlds must be more visually sophisticated—so absorbing as virtual spaces, alive with light and shadow and physics, that we will be more accepting of less aggression? More accepting of playing out stories, interacting with characters in broader forms of communication? Simply existing to explore and uncover the mysteries of the virtual reality far beyond destroying everything in it? Ultimately, is the definition of what makes gameplay involving far too rigid?

These are just a few questions that arise from a narrow, subjective look at the concept of gameplay, but I think the topic is fascinating in its scope. What exactly is gameplay? How do we define

it? It's open to such vast interpretation, far more so than if someone were to discuss the mechanics of telling a story, writing a screenplay. There are very specific sets of rules and conventions, far more defined than what underlines the idea of formal gameplay.

Describing how gameplay affects us is even more abstractly complicated. It's much easier to articulate the impact, say, a movie has on you; you look at the range of emotions, the structure of the story—did it make you sad, happy, scared, in love with the characters, emboldened by the unfolding themes or thrilled by the mystery? Games, at least now, are very limited in what we traditionally view as intellectual or emotional pallets. Pointing to what makes a game good or bad is only going to become increasingly more elusive as more and more complex variables and personal tastes enter the picture, not to mention what makes the underlying gameplay good or bad. How do you fully define the bond you form with the character, the personal sense of belonging to a place that is virtual fantasy? It's no wonder we often confine to labeling it the experience, the "feeling."

One of the more recent arguments on gameplay theory I had with a colleague involved *Killer 7*, a game I found important and thrilling, but is not without its

"What exactly is gameplay? How do we define it? It's open to such vast interpretation, far more so than if someone were to discuss the mechanics of telling a story..."

vehement detractors. Some argue the gameplay is dull and mechanical, too simple and too monotonous, and therefore the game had little merit for success. I counter with an example within the game: you take the simple idea of a) an enemy approaching you, b) you draw a gun, c) you apply a couple quick shots for the kill and move to the next similar encounter. Now take that encounter, and provide the information of a room around you that is evocative and immersing; characters that delight you with their mere presence; the way that they enter the frame; the perspective and use of sound and movement. There can be beauty to simplicity when drafted through the eyes of artists. The puzzles too aren't so much puzzles as visually interactive steps, applied through an absorbingly interactive visual place of marvels. You aren't deducting, you're experiencing the world. You're finding more tangibility within its walls despite the lack of problem solving.

The academic discussion on games is really just beginning. We're defining the rules as we go along, as technology and experimentation continually evolve. I offer more questions for thought here than a depth of ideas or understanding. So draw your own conclusions and ask yourself: what is your definition of great gameplay?



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